

Our ultimate **NFL MOCK DRAFT** issue

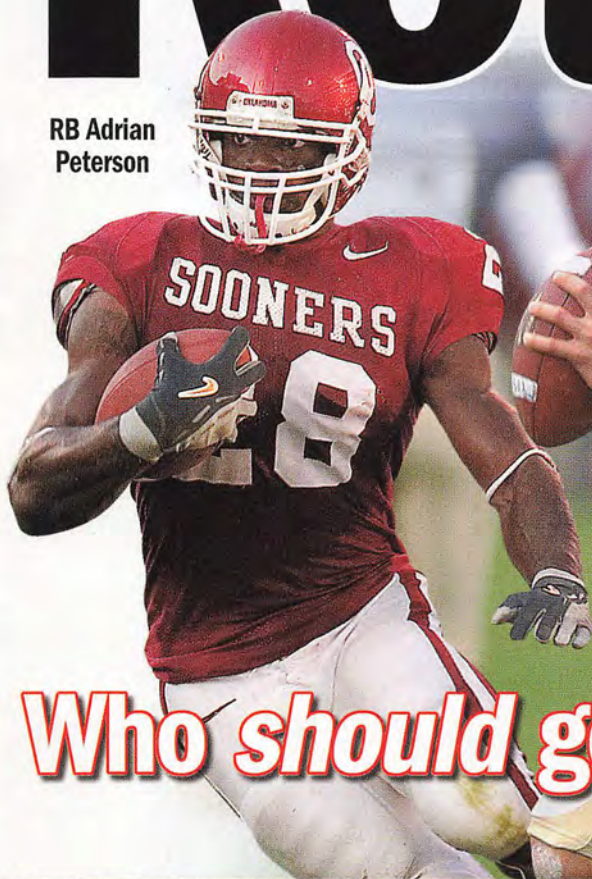
Inside baseball's
best division

Sporting News

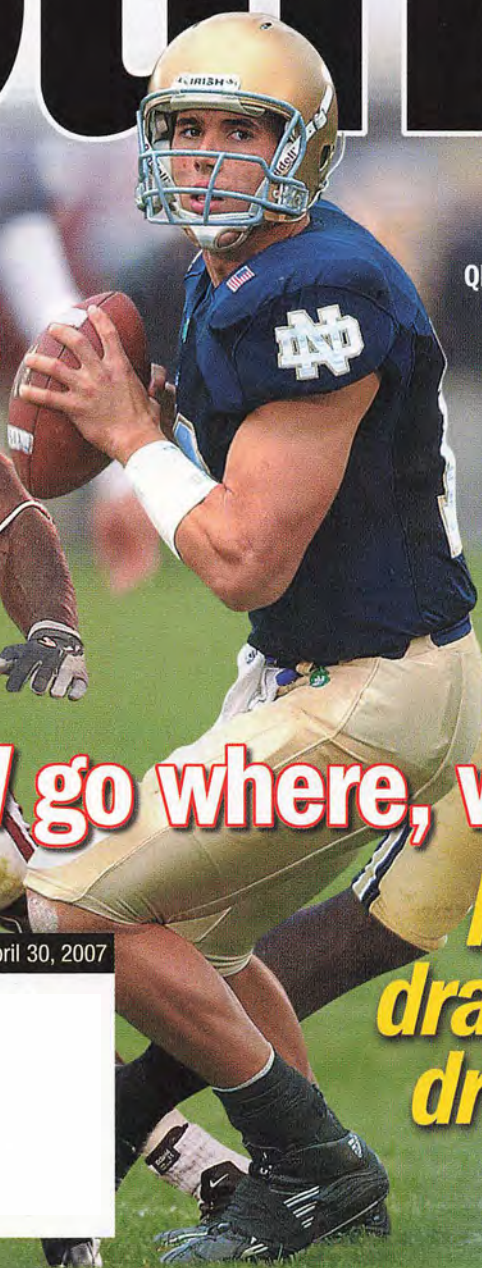
SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

The perfect Round 1

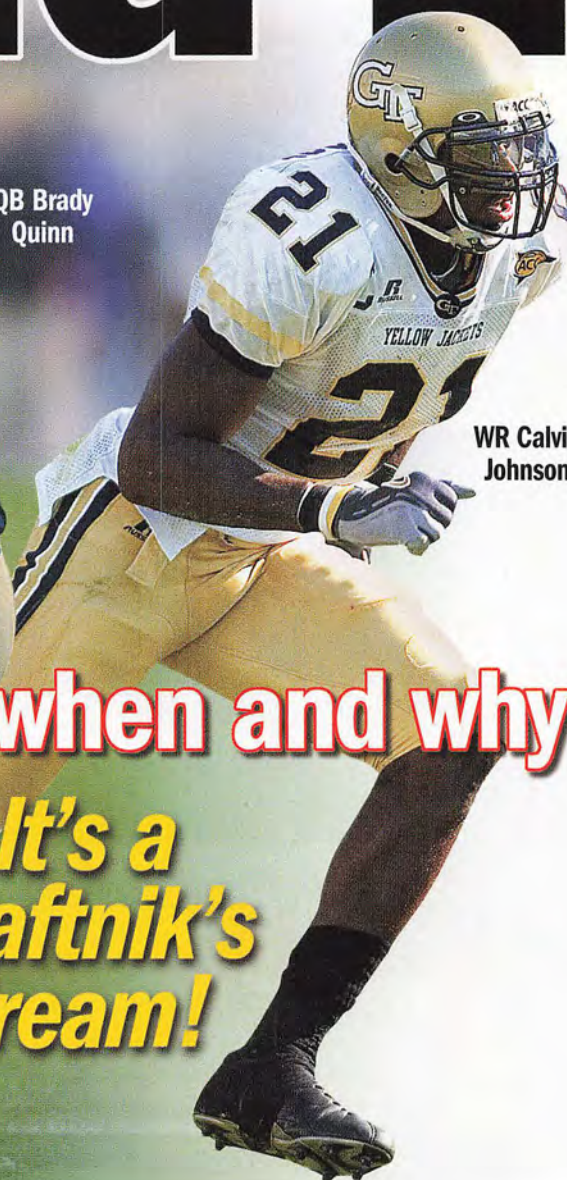
RB Adrian
Peterson



QB Brady
Quinn



WR Calvin
Johnson



Who should go where, when and why

**It's a
draftnik's
dream!**

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Week of April 30, 2007



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ALBERT DICKSON / SN

> BASEBALL

16 'Being what they are'

A.L. Central teams reflect their blue-collar cities—proof that resourcefulness can overcome a lack of resources.

By Sean Deveney

COVER STORY

> NFL: THE ULTIMATE MOCK DRAFT

20 Mock 5

Buckle up for our five draft simulations because we're all over the map—and so are the players.

22 The insiders' view In this draft, our team correspondents don't grade the picks—they make them. By Matt Crossman **Plus**, how many picks will we nail by pulling them out of a hat?

26 A perfect mockery If NFL teams knew what was best for them, they'd pick these players in Round 1. By Vinnie Iyer

30 The people's choice So, pal, you think you could run your team's draft? Thirty-one of SportingNews.com's five-star bloggers set out to prove they could.

33 Trading spaces War Room scouts throw a few trades into the mix.

> NBA PLAYOFFS

44 Talkin' with T-Mac

After five one-and-dones with little help and a balky back, Houston's Tracy McGrady says he finally is healthy and on a team that can do some damage in the playoffs.

16

It's not just the Twins who are leaving the Royals in the A.L. Central dust. The Tigers, Indians and White Sox also are flying high in the race to win baseball's best division.

KNOW IT ALL

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COVER: QUINN BY DAVID DUROCHIK FOR SN, PETERSON BY ROBERT SEALE / SN ARCHIVES, JOHNSON BY BOB LEVERONE / SN

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A man with a mustache, wearing a dark brown Dickies work jacket with multiple straps and buckles, stands against a textured, metallic background. He holds a yellow hard hat in his right hand and a pair of work gloves in his left. The Dickies logo, featuring a red and yellow horseshoe design, is prominently displayed in the upper right corner.

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This week on **SportingNews**.COM



JAY BROWNS / SN

/NFL DRAFT/ On the web ...

From Gaines Adams to **Jared Zabransky**, we'll have you covered—before, during and after the draft. Visit the Pro Football War Room for scouting reports, team needs, pick-by-pick analysis, a breakdown of winners and losers, Vinnie Iyer's live blog and more at sportingnews.com/nfl/warroom.

... and over the air

Sporting News Radio's Bob Berger, Bob Stelton and Brian Baldinger will have live pick-by-pick coverage—including interviews with the top draftees—all weekend from Radio City Music Hall. Listen from noon to 7 p.m. Saturday and 1 to 6 p.m. Sunday at radio.sportingnews.com.

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online at radio.sportingnews.com.

/NBA/ Get the early draft buzz

The early-entry deadline is this week; who will make the leap and who shouldn't? Insiders Mike DeCourcy and Sean Deveney will blog on the NBA's rookies-to-be at sportingnews.com/nba.

/FANTASY BASEBALL/ Time for some tweakin'

One month of the season is over—and you're itchin' to make some roster changes. Get advice and strategy tips from our Fantasy Source experts at fantasy.sportingnews.com/baseball.

/MEMBERS/ Five-star profile

★★★★★
Member name: 3peatTrojans
Member since: November 2005
Hometown: Santa Ana, Calif.
Favorite teams: Dodgers, Raiders, Kings (NHL), but above all, the USC Trojans

How he chose the name 3peatTrojans: "It was a spur-of-the-moment name, but it means 2002, 2003, 2004 Pac-10 champs. It would have been nice for a national championship in 2005 to give it that meaning also."

Has Matt Leinart turned you into an Arizona Cardinals fan? "I do keep up with Leinart and would like to see Dwayne Jarrett or Steve Smith added to his team, but Raiders Nation wouldn't be happy if I said I was a fan of Arizona."

Predictions for the 2007 Trojans football team? "If everyone stays healthy, first we win the Pac-10, then the BCS. I don't think any team comes close to us if we stay healthy."

Take on the NFL: "It's still the ugly stepbrother of college football."

 What team do you live and die by? Join our free community and start your blog at members.sportingnews.com/member.

Discussions available on <http://www.sportingnews.com/>

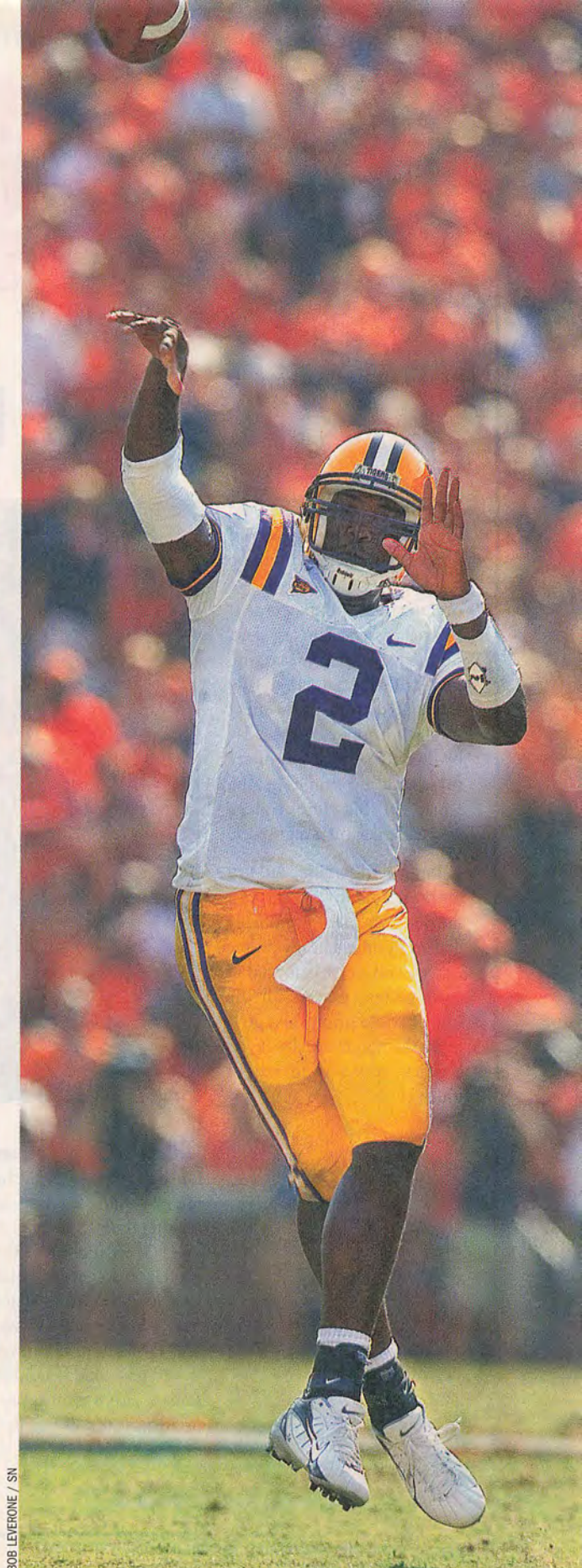
Mock dra

CORRESPONDENTS		
1	 Oakland	QB JaMarcus Russell
2	 Detroit	WR Calvin Johnson
3	 Cleveland	QB Brady Quinn
4	 Tampa Bay	OT Joe Thomas
5	 Arizona	DE Gaines Adams
6	 Washington	DT Alan Branch
7	 Minnesota	RB Adrian Peterson
8	 Atlanta	S LaRon Landry
9	 Miami	OT Levi Brown
10	 Houston	OT Joe Staley
11	 San Francisco	DE Adam Carriker
12	 Buffalo	ILB Patrick Willis
13	 St. Louis	DT Amobi Okoye
14	 Carolina	WR Ted Ginn
15	 Pittsburgh	CB Leon Hall
16	 Green Bay	CB Darrelle Revis
17	 Jacksonville	DE Jamaal Anderson
18	 Cincinnati	S Reggie Nelson
19	 Tennessee	WR Dwayne Bowe
20	 N.Y. Giants	CB Aaron Ross
21	 Denver	DE Anthony Spencer
22	 Dallas	DE Jarvis Moss
23	 Kansas City	CB Marcus McCauley
24	 New England	OLB Jon Beason
25	 N.Y. Jets	G/T Justin Blalock
26	 Philadelphia	TE Greg Olsen
27	 New Orleans	CB Chris Houston
28	 New England	CB Tanard Jackson
29	Baltimore	OT Tony Ugoh
30	San Diego	OLB Paul Posluszny
31	Chicago	G Ben Grubbs
32	Indianapolis	WR Robert Meachem

fts out the wazoo

Spread across pages 20-33 are NFL mock drafts by SPORTING NEWS correspondents, SportingNews.com five-star bloggers and SN expert Vinnie Iyer, plus a trade-based mock by War Room scouts and a random, names-from-a-helmet mock. This grid makes it infinitely easier to compare which players went where in each one.

BLOGGERS	IYER	WAR ROOM SCOUTS	OUT OF A HELMET
Russell	Russell	Russell (by Cleveland)	ILB Patrick Willis
Johnson	DE Gaines Adams	Johnson (by Tampa Bay)	Adams
OT Joe Thomas	RB Adrian Peterson	Quinn (by Oakland)	OLB Lawrence Timmons
DE Gaines Adams	WR Calvin Johnson	Thomas (by Detroit)	Johnson
OT Levi Brown	OT Joe Thomas	RB Adrian Peterson	OLB Jon Beason
DT Amobi Okoye	DE Jamaal Anderson	DE Gaines Adams	OT Levi Brown
WR Ted Ginn	CB Leon Hall	Hall	S Brandon Meriweather
Landry	Landry	Landry	CB Darrelle Revis
QB Brady Quinn	Brown	Brown	WR Ted Ginn
RB Adrian Peterson	WR Ted Ginn	WR Dwayne Bowe	S Reggie Nelson
CB Leon Hall	DT Alan Branch	Branch	QB JaMarcus Russell
Willis	Willis	RB Marshawn Lynch	WR Robert Meachem
DE Jarvis Moss	Okoye	Okoye	TE Greg Olsen
TE Greg Olsen	QB Brady Quinn	ILB Patrick Willis	DT DeMarcus Tyler
OLB Lawrence Timmons	Timmons	OLB Paul Posluszny	CB Chris Houston
TE Clark Harris	TE Greg Olsen	DE J. Anderson (by Tenn.)	CB Aaron Ross
S Reggie Nelson	Nelson	Nelson	WR Dwayne Jarrett
OLB Paul Posluszny	CB Aaron Ross	CB Darrelle Revis	Posluszny
Bowe	Bowe	WR Ted Ginn (by G.B.)	RB Marshawn Lynch
CB Darrelle Revis	OLB Paul Posluszny	CB Tanard Jackson	Jackson
WR Dwayne Jarrett	DE Jarvis Moss	DE Adam Carriker	Spencer
S Michael Griffin	CB Darrelle Revis	Moss	RB Adrian Peterson
DT Alan Branch	CB Daymeion Hughes	CB Aaron Ross	DE Jarvis Moss
CB Aaron Ross	S Brandon Meriweather	Meriweather	CB Daymeion Hughes
CB Chris Houston	Houston	Houston	DE Adam Carriker
S/OLB Sabby Piscitelli	DE Charles Johnson	Johnson	CB Marcus McCauley
DE Jamaal Anderson	CB Marcus McCauley	McCauley	S LaRon Landry
S Brandon Meriweather	Jackson	ILB David Harris	S Michael Griffin
G/T Justin Blalock	Ugoh	Ugoh	TE Clark Harris
WR Robert Meachem	Meachem	WR Aundrae Allison	Allison
TE Zach Miller	G/T Justin Blalock	TE Greg Olsen	OT Tony Ugoh
DT DeMarcus Tyler	OLB Jon Beason	Beason	DE Jamaal Anderson



BOB LEVERONE / SN

Russell is the consensus No. 1 pick in this year's draft with the only dissenting opinion coming from a helmet.

TO KNOW LIST

8 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week

1 THE MAIN EVENT Mixed messages

If the NCAA has its way, the next hot recruiting tool for college coaches might be stone tablets and a chisel. The organization's management council passed a ban last week on the use of text messaging in recruiting, and that rule was slated to go into effect August 1 if approved Thursday by the NCAA board of directors. Not everyone in the world of big-time college sports thinks this is a gr8 idea.

Tommy Tuberville, Auburn football coach: "I don't like the new ban. Heck, I probably had 75 numbers in my phone last recruiting season, and I used to text players all the time. I could group-text guys or do them individually. It was a quick, easy way to stay in touch."



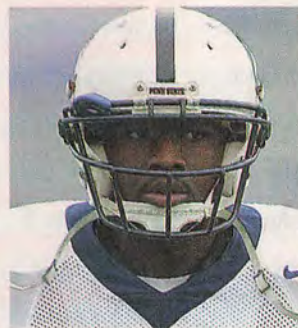
Greg Schiano, Rutgers football coach: "All the texting had a way of ruining the life of a coach and a recruit. First, the messages can get expensive for a kid. And from what I hear, some coaches would text at all hours. I never would text a kid if I didn't think it also was an appropriate time to call him up."



Geno Auriemma, UConn women's basketball coach and father of Class of 2007 recruit Mike Auriemma: "You can't eliminate it because that's how kids today choose to communicate. We're kind of living in their world, and we're going to have to adjust to it."



Derrick Williams, Penn State wide receiver and former Rivals.com No. 1 recruit: "Kids need time to just be kids and not worry about (coaches) text messaging them. Just wait until they get home from school, and do the right thing by calling them one time a week."



Trent Johnson, Stanford basketball coach: "In every form of contact with a student athlete in high school, we need to make sure we involve the parents and don't affect his education. If a kid is in class and he gets texts from three top schools, *that's* going to have his attention."



Lance Stephenson, a top five prospect in the hoops Class of 2009: "The only thing I do is type on MySpace, but it doesn't matter to me. If texting is what you do, you can text me."



NEWS YOU CAN'T USE

Pacman takes out ad to apologize for having agent write previous apologies >> NFL fines No. 1 pick \$50,000 for loosening tie below the second button

2 IN THE SPOTLIGHT: DAY 1 QUARTERBACKS

Don't go to sleep on these guys

JaMarcus Russell or Brady Quinn? That is *the* quarterback question going into the NFL draft. But for every QB-hungry team, there are three sneaky passing prospects to consider later on Saturday—and we see them falling off the board in this order:



John Beck, BYU. Past Cougars QBs have been knocked as products of a pass-happy offense, but Beck has proved to be one of the most intelligent and athletic in this class. War Room projection: Round 3 to the Lions.

Trent Edwards, Stanford.

Though the smarts and the arm are there, whichever team takes him will need to help him put it all together. War Room projection: Round 3 to the Browns, though some teams have him much lower.

Kevin Kolb, Houston.

Kolb is a bit of an enigma after playing in a limited, short-passing offense. If he makes the transition to the pro style, mentally and



physically, his upside may be better than Quinn's. War Room projection: Round 3 to the Jaguars. —Vinnie Iyer

MICHAEL DWYER / AP

GREG CAMPBELL / AP

3 SPORTS BUSINESS

Big and full

The NBA broke its attendance record for the third straight year by drawing more than 21.8 million fans during the 2006-07 season. The top three home attendance averages—Bulls (22,253), Pistons (22,076) and Cavaliers (20,436)—were achieved by teams that happen to play in the three arenas with the largest capacities in the league. Which begs the question: Why don't all the other teams simply add some more seats?

4 GONE FISHIN' You won't see Joe Thomas—who could go as high as No. 2 in the NFL

draft—wearing a suit on TV this weekend. Despite calls from commish Roger Goodell for his presence, Thomas (he's *such* a diva) will honor an annual tradition and fish for coho salmon on Lake Michigan with his father.



JAY DROWNS / SN

5 TECH SUPPORT

It's a marathon, not a ...

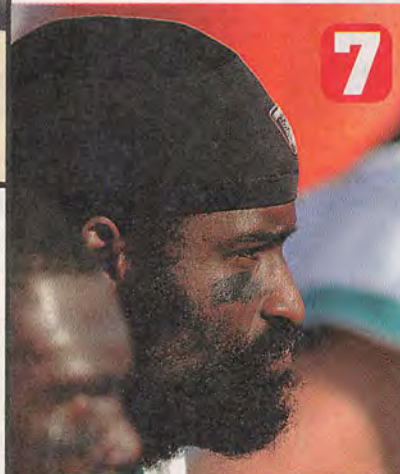


The NFL draft is about to start and your kid's Little League game just went into extra innings. Or the guy in front of you in the 10-items-or-less line has enough groceries to feed a small country. No problem if you're a Sprint customer. The wireless carrier is offering a tailgate-sized helping of information leading up to and during the NFL draft—from player bios to real-time updates to a live feed of NFL Network's broadcast. The best part? It's free for Vision and Power Vision subscribers. Just text NFL to 7777. —Tricia Garner

6 YOU HEARD IT HERE

From Paul Attner's NFL Inside Dish (page 51):

'Some personnel guys believe up to 90 percent of draft-eligible players have smoked marijuana.'

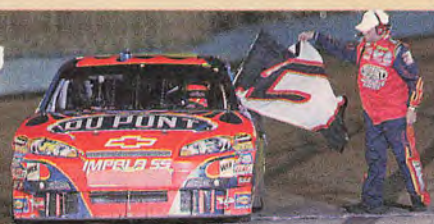


JOHN CORDS FOR SN

'It is almost inconceivable Ricky Williams will be on the Dolphins' opening day roster.'

8 NUMBER THAT WILL COUNT

77



JASON BABYAK / AP

Jeff Gordon's next Nextel Cup win will move him into sixth place all-time—one victory ahead of Dale Earnhardt, whom Gordon tied with last week's win at Phoenix, the 76th of his career. Next up: Cale Yarborough, at 83. That will take a season or two, but it is doable. So is passing Darrell Waltrip and Bobby Allison, who are tied for third with 84 wins. But Gordon will never catch David Pearson at 105. Richard Petty's record is 200. —Matt Crossman

ON DECK

The week ahead in sports



Tagliabue has nothing on Goodell, aka Mr. Electricity.

ROSS D. FRANKLIN / AP

BOB HILLE'S STARTING

5

THIS I GOTTA SEE All times Eastern

PICK of the WEEK



WARNER BROTHERS

Doesn't every guy want his girl hovering at the table when there's big money in the pot?

FRI 4

Lucky You, which opens in theaters nationwide, is the tale of a big-time poker player named Huck who tries to win the heart of Billie, played by Drew Barrymore. It's worth checking out if you're really into poker—or main characters named Huck.

SAT 28 NFL draft (Noon, ESPN and NFL Network). This nonevent has become such a big event it takes two networks to cover it. And soon enough, we'll have the answer to the biggest question hovering over this draft: Is there any possible way Roger Goodell can light up a podium like Tags?

SUN 29 Aaron's 499 (1:30 p.m., FOX). Any lug nut will tell you Talladega is all that and a grill full of brats. Don't let the name fool you—the drivers really do go the extra mile.

■ **Cubs-Cardinals** (8 p.m., ESPN). Neither team has blazed through its early schedule, but as the '06 Cards and '08 Cubs showed, what really matters is how you finish.

MON 30 NBA playoffs, first round (8 and 10:30 p.m.). TNT is pledging 40 games in 40 days, so asking you to commit to two in one night doesn't seem out of line.

TUE 1 NFL draft wrapup show (8 p.m., ESPN). Here's your chance to get up to speed just in case you didn't have, you know, 18 hours to kill over the weekend.

WED 2 Phillies-Braves (7:30 p.m., ESPN). You might say it's too early to call a series "critical," but then you haven't walked in Charlie Manuel's shoes—shoes that are getting mighty worn out from those five trips to the mound each and every day. —Kyle Veltrop



TOM MIHALEK / AP

Lookin' slick, Jimmy Rollins! Now go win one for Skip.

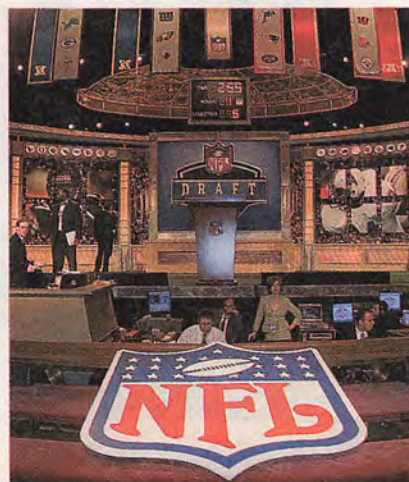
COMING AT YOU

In the May 7 issue

Are you ready for more football? Um, you may have noticed that we've kinda-sorta been talking about the NFL draft a little bit in recent issues. And, well, ya see, the thing is ... we're not sorry! Nor are we done. Keep your belts buckled for another blowout section on the draft—this time, we'll analyze every team's picks and identify the league's biggest winners and losers. Paul Attner also will take you inside the world of an agent and his band of hopeful prospects on Day 2 of the draft.

■ Why baseball's superutility players are even more valuable than they seem.

■ The best young American pitcher who may never reach the big leagues.



JOHN DUNN FOR SN

4 The NCAA. Its Postseason Subcommittee "reapproved" all of last season's 32 bowl games. The one dissenting vote: OU's rep on last season's Fiesta Bowl.

5 America's Cup. I'm not much into yacht racing, but I did note several postponements last week in Spain because of a lack of wind. Pity that Mel Kiper Jr. has a prior commitment.



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NUMBERS THAT COUNT

233 Wide receivers drafted this decade, tops among all positions 33 Wide receivers projected by War Room scouts to be picked in 2007—tops once again



Not that USC vs. ND is a fair fight these days ... 451

Notre Dame players who have been taken in NFL drafts, the most of any school. Rival Southern California is second (and closing) with 432. The name of the first Irish player taken? Bill Shakespeare, the No. 3 overall pick in 1936.

0

NFL plays for Mr. Shakespeare. Alas, poor William!

19

Top five picks in USC history, the most for any school. Notre Dame, which has 18 top fives, could even the score with Brady Quinn's help.

47

Schools that have had a No. 1 overall pick. USC and Notre Dame share the lead for most No. 1s, with five apiece.



Mostly sunny skies



JAY DROWNS / SN

12 Consecutive years in which Miami has had a player drafted in the first round, the longest run by any school in draft history. Tight end **Greg Olsen** and safety Brandon Meriweather have the best shots to keep the streak alive.

10 Florida Gators projected to come off the board in the latest mock draft by War Room scouts. The most players selected from a school the year it won or shared the national title: 14, from USC in 1975.

1 out of 3 For all the buzz about the Big Three Florida schools, two of them—Florida State and Florida—have never produced a No. 1 pick. Miami has done so twice.

Greats, not-so-greats and, uh, two other guys

15.5 Percent of No. 1 overall picks who have been inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Bill Dudley, chosen by the Steelers in 1942, was the first to make it into the Hall. Of course, other No. 1s—including some guy named Peyton—figure to be “bust”—worthy someday.

40 First-round picks who never played a down in the NFL. **Jay Berwanger**, the first pick in the inaugural draft in 1936, opted for a job as a foam rubber salesman.



SN ARCHIVES

2 **Where's Waldo?** Two have been drafted, Waldo Binkley in 1951 and Waldo Schaaf in 1952. By all accounts, it looks like we'll have a 55th straight Waldo-less year.

And the gold medal goes to ... Yamon Figurs?

4.30

Seconds it took the Kansas State wideout, a projected Day 2 pick, to run the 40-yard dash at the 2007 NFL Combine. Deion Sanders' 4.29 is listed by the NFL as the fastest 40 recorded at the Combine, but that came in 1989, a year before electronic timing.



BOB LEVERONE / SN



IRA GOSTIN / AP

4.38

Seconds experts have estimated it took Ben Johnson to run 40 yards during his steroids-aided, world record-breaking 100 meters in the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

Sports talk with Geddy Lee

Rush frontman, Blue Jays season-ticket holder

SN: I hear your fantasy league is hard-core.

LEE: It's a fantastic indulgence in baseball insanity. We have 40-man rosters. We have very, very tough eligibility rules. These leagues that have you play one day at third base and you're a third baseman just don't cut it for me. They're a joke.

SN: All other things being equal, would you draft a Rush fan over a Canadian?

LEE: I have no Canadian bias when it comes to ballplayers. When it comes to winning my league, it's numbers that count. I don't care if he's a Rush fan.

SN: Which was better, getting mentioned on *SportsCenter* or *Mystery Science Theater 3000*?

LEE: *MST3K*, for sure. No offense to Dan Patrick, but *MST3K*, I mean, that's forever.

SN: You guys will tour this summer in support of your new album, *Snakes and Arrows* (in stores May 1). Do you really check your fantasy lineup during intermissions?



The words of the profits are written on the *Sporting News* wall: We dig Geddy.



RICH ARDEN / ESPN



FRANK GUNN / AP

LEE: With the Internet, I can check and see if I've got a pitcher going.

SN: So instead of thinking about the "Spirit of Radio," you're thinking, "Should I have played Tom Glavine tonight?"

LEE: Exactly—damn, I hope he's not getting beat up.

SN: Ever make a trade during a drum solo?

LEE: No. Trades must be seriously considered. I would never do anything so rash.

SN: "Limelight" is your best song. It quotes William Shakespeare. Are you ever going to do a song that quotes Peter Dinklage?

LEE: It's possible, especially now that I know him. He's very quotable—one of the greatest storytellers I've ever met in my life. He's a fantastic character. He knows almost as much about music, maybe more, than he does about baseball.

SN: Which is the bigger fashion mistake, the robes Rush wore in the 1970s or the White Sox uniforms from the same era?

LEE: The White Sox, for sure. Or the Pirates. The "We Are Family" Pirates, that was a bad uniform. —Matt Crossman

SPORTING NEWS RADIO

Sheff's got Barry's back

Gary Sheffield On Barry Bonds: "I think he's being singled out. This man has done a lot for the game. Truth be told, I want to see him break this record."





ALBERT DICKSON / SN

He wouldn't be Gary Sheffield without that fire in the belly.

On Hank Aaron's saying he won't watch Bonds break the home run record: "I was sad to hear that. I've always respected Hank Aaron. I'm not saying he *has* to be there, but I really think he should. If records are meant to be broken and it's your record, I think you should be there."

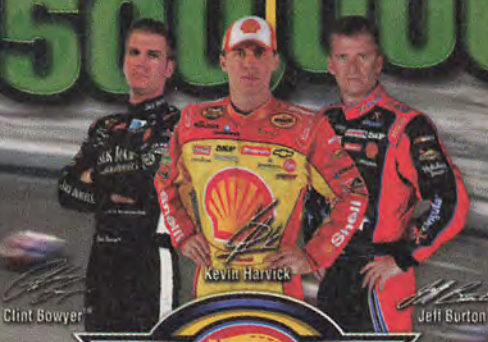
On the difference between Jim Leyland and Joe Torre: "I think our communication is a lot better, me and Leyland. We talk a lot more, not just about baseball but about whatever's going on. Joe Torre, the only time I talk to him is dealing with baseball-related issues. That's about it."

 The Bob Berger & Bob Stelton Show airs weekends from 1 to 7 p.m. on Sporting News Radio.

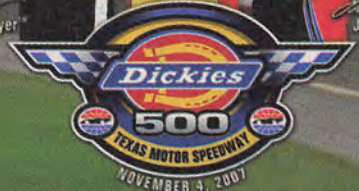


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YOUR TURN

You rant, we listen. Send e-mails to yourturn@sportingnews.com.

I have never seen a player ejected for laughing on the bench, let alone one of the class acts and MVPs of the league. Joey Crawford should realize that people don't pay to see him blow a whistle—or to see Tim Duncan in the locker room. —*aperkins116 via SportingNews.com*

■ When asking why there are fewer black players in baseball (SN, April 16), wouldn't it be fair to ask why there are also fewer white players in baseball than there used to be? Or why there aren't more Hispanic players in football and basketball? To point out only that there are fewer blacks in baseball and not focus on the whole racial sports picture is discriminatory. —*Ron Sprague via e-mail*

■ I don't hear any crying about whites comprising only a small percentage in the NBA. If you are going to call for more black baseball

players, you also need to call for more white basketball players. —*Steve Davis, Memphis*

■ Pacman Jones (SN, April 16) is a dysfunctional individual whose only saving grace is that he can play football. Hopefully, his suspension from the NFL will turn him around. —*Larry Eisenstein, Orlando*

■ Tom Dienhart refers to Dennis Erickson as a "job-hopper" and a "coaching mercenary" (SN, April 16). What an understatement! Hon-



This is a laughing matter, pal—and laughing matters aren't funny!

esty and integrity are words Erickson doesn't know. —*John Groshell, Fall City, Wash.*

■ Matt Hayes' article on Nick Saban (SN, April 16) was a joy. Finally, a suitable punishment has been found for the man. —*K.C. Mosier II via e-mail*

■ If Keith Olbermann can keep to sports and leave the politics to another forum, then fine. If not, to heck with NBC. —*terpfan76 via SportingNews.com*



Team Spirit ... It's in the Bag

POLLING PLACE

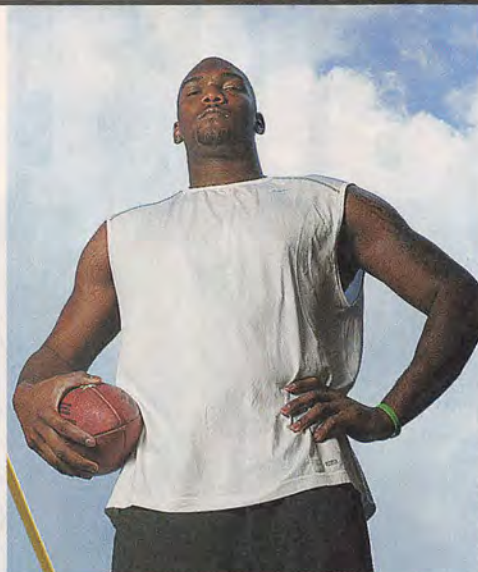
When the NFL draft dust settles, will **JaMarcus Russell** be a Raider?

SPORTINGNEWS.COM
MEMBERS

YES 71%
NO 29%

SPORTING NEWS STAFF

YES 77%
NO 23%



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

RADIO★STAR

Real talk from a fan on Sporting News Radio

'I don't know how **Frank Beamer** is going to be able to keep his team focused come the fall. Tragedies like the one that occurred at Virginia Tech are not something that you can just put out of your head. The Hokies are going to be thinking about this for a while.'

—Mike in Charlotte on the Tim Brando Show



BOB LEVERONE / SN

BLOG ON

From your blogs on sportingnews.com



MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ / AP

Mullin

RE: SMART MONEY

Posted by *huntthis*

Because of their salary constraints, the A's will never lead the league in the stats they hold dear. Yet they continue to win because they understand what the statistics reveal better than their opponents do.

RE: GOLDEN MOVE

Posted by *stevecaria*

Chris Mullin for executive of the year! Mullin stepped in and put together the best trade in Warriors history. He unloaded two of the worst contracts ever in Troy Murphy's and Mike Dunleavy's and an unknown in Ike Diogu. Al Harrington

is a tough, inside-out power forward who can run the court and do everything Murphy could do but with 100 percent more athleticism. Stephen Jackson is essential to Don Nelson's run-and-gun offense and has the ability to shoot, distribute the ball and take his man to the hole off the dribble. Harrington and Jackson are young and have reasonable contracts to boot.

RE: STRESS TEST

Posted by *cubbie8763*

Junior is going to kill me. He can race so well and then mess up at the end. Junior will be in the top 12 at the end, though.



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Being all they



can be

It's a close call when trying to determine the A.L. Central's best team, but there's no question the division is full of stars such as Mauer.

MLB

Talented A.L. Central teams reflect their blue-collar cities—proof that resourcefulness can overcome a lack of resources
By Sean Deveney

It's a cold Easter Sunday in Chicago, and the path to U.S. Cellular Field looks like something out of *American Gladiators*, had the show been conceived by the Department of Transportation. The Dan Ryan Expressway—which slices through the gentrifying neighborhoods and dreary housing projects that dot the South Side—is undergoing a \$400 million face-lift that is snarling traffic as drivers maneuver their way through a maze of orange barrels, loose gravel and potholes that could swallow a Honda whole. White Sox fans wrapped in blankets linger outside. The parking lot attendants have cumulonimbus breath. Manager Ozzie Guillen jokes that he'll be OK because he has "20 jackets on."

In the visiting dugout, the Minnesota Twins huddle near the turbo heater. However, the prime spot—the patch of bench next to the heater—is empty. "That one is reserved," Twins outfielder Michael Cud-dyer says. Reserved, it turns out, for Minnesota's starting pitcher, Johan Santana, who spends the afternoon either hugging the heater, sneaking back into the clubhouse warmth to loosen up or, as is his custom, dominating the White Sox. "It was cold," Santana said after allowing one single and striking out nine in seven innings for his 10th win in his past 11 decisions against the Sox. "But next to the heater, that's my spot."

Welcome to the A.L. Central, a five-team bunch of Midwestern teams in Midwestern cities playing in Midwestern conditions. You've got to be tough to play in these parts, and not just because of the

ALBERT DICKSON / SN

'There's no use in complaining about payroll or any of that stuff.' —Twins G.M. Terry Ryan

elements. Over the past five seasons, the Central's teams have come to reflect their surroundings: middle- to small-market operations run on resourcefulness and blue-collar diligence. In doing so, the Central has become baseball's powerhouse division, one Cleveland general manager Mark Shapiro calls "definitively the best division in the sport. We have four teams that could win the whole league. Not just the division, the league."

No player better represents the rise of the Central than Santana, a product of the Twins' shrewd scouting and superior player development. In December 1999, the Twins plucked Santana in a Rule 5 draft deal with Florida, which claimed Santana from the Astros and then traded him—along with \$50,000—to Minnesota for fellow minor league pitcher Jared Camp. Yep, the Marlins gave the Twins Santana and \$50,000. Now, armed with the game's best changeup, Santana has won two of the past three Cy Young awards in the American League, and his career winning percentage entering this week—rounded off to .717—is a fraction behind Spud Chandler's record figure for pitchers who have thrown 1,000 or more innings. Santana could go down as the best left-hander in history. "We struggle with him," says White Sox first baseman Paul Konerko, "but at least we can say, 'Who doesn't?'"

The Central is loaded with talented young starting pitchers—Santana, Justin Verlander, Jeremy Bonderman, C.C. Sabathia, Jon Garland. And don't forget lefty Mark Buehrle, who struggled in 2006 but threw a no-hitter last week and appears to be back in top form.

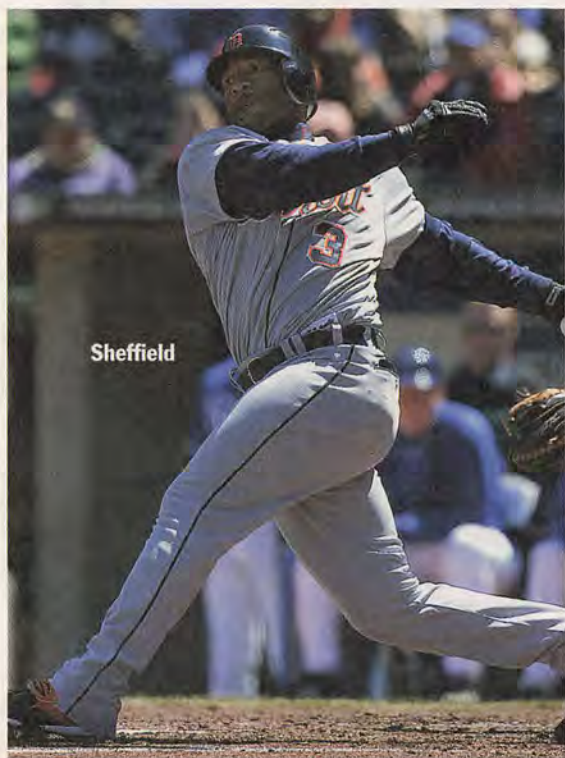
"It's important for us to get a lot of good young arms," says Minnesota G.M. Terry Ryan, "and see if we can develop them. That's what happened with Johan—I can't sit here and say I knew he was going to be this good. It takes a little luck."

Luck, yes, but the Twins' approach to team-building also is the result of necessity. Ryan, who has been the team's G.M. since 1994, figured out pretty early that baseball's payroll disparity would forever keep him and the small-market Twins from landing top free agents. Instead of sinking big money into the offseason market, why not spend on scouting and creating a more permanent

system in which the Twins can find and bring along talent? There was nearly a decade of lean years, but in 2002, Ryan's approach paid off. The Twins won the first of three consecutive Central titles. "There's no use in complaining about payroll or any of that stuff," Ryan says. "You just have to be what you are."

That's a profound message around the Central. The teams play in similar markets—industrial cities that have felt the sting of the changing national economy, which has sapped population and capital from once-vibrant downtown districts (or, in Chicago's case, the South Side). *Be what you are.* Don't spend like you're a team in an East Coast metropolis if you're not a team in an East Coast metropolis.

Thus, in recent years, Detroit amassed young pitchers. Cleveland rebuilt its aging, highly paid roster. Chicago G.M. Ken Williams traded slugger Carlos Lee for speedy outfielder Scott Podsednik because Williams wanted his team to be more like the Twins. Kansas City G.M. Dayton Moore, hired last year to oversee the rebuilding of a Royals franchise that remains a major work in progress, says, "The way the Twins have done things is a blueprint for having success in our kind of market. But when everyone is doing things that way, it makes a tough division."



Santana is a big reason why the Twins are good, but he may be too good to keep.

It's Jackie Robinson Day in Cleveland, and the windchill reading is in the 20s. Snowbanks around Jacobs Field, tinged brown with dirt, recall the snowstorms that forced the Indians to postpone an entire series with Seattle and play their home opener in Milwaukee. Minutes before the afternoon game with the White Sox, Indians radio play-by-play man Tom Hamilton tells listeners, "It's a miserable day as far as baseball weather goes." Hearing that, a team official groans: "Should be good for the walk-up sales." Attendance is so sparse, the team closes the upper deck.

From 1994-2001, the Indians were a free-spending A.L. powerhouse; they won the Central Division six times and sold out 455 consecutive games. "It was pretty crazy," says Jim Thome, a member of those Indians teams who now is with the White Sox. "It's kind of sad it's not like that anymore." But the change was necessary after Dick Jacobs sold the team, which was aging and showing cracks, to Larry Dolan in 2000. Dolan could not pump up the payroll the way Jacobs had. The Indians would have to rebuild to better reflect their market. "It was obvious by 2002 that we needed to rebuild," says Shapiro. "We had to be a more efficient organization."

The first step of that rebuilding was the 2002 trade of Bartolo Colon, a deal that angered fans and players. But the trade yielded star center fielder Grady Sizemore and lefty Cliff Lee, who will be the team's No. 2 starter when he returns from the disabled list. The Indians are loaded with offense—designated hitter Travis Hafner and catcher Victor Martinez are stars, and Ryan Garko, Andy Marte, Josh Barfield, Jhonny Peralta and Casey Blake have the obvious potential to develop into high-end hitters.

But the Indians know their weakness: the bullpen. Cleveland was second in the majors in runs scored last year, but the Indians were a disappointing 78-84—largely because opponents exploited the bullpen and won 17 games in their final at-bat. Shapiro rebuilt the relief corps by adding veteran Roberto Hernandez, lefty Aaron Fultz and closer Joe Borowski.

Standing by his locker, a pinch of Skoal in his lip as he adjusts the television to the Discovery Channel for his son, Borowski knows what's on his shoulders. "There is a lot of talent here," says Borowski, who is about to turn 36. "There was last year. But in the late innings, you have to be able to finish off the game. That's my job." Borowski did his job in all five of his save opportunities in the first two weeks of the season but then was rocked for six ninth-inning runs in a crushing Yankees comeback last week.

It's players like Borowski—brought in to plug weaknesses—who will determine the Central this year. Drive through Detroit on Michigan Avenue, past the decrepit, abandoned Tiger Stadium and the similarly decrepit brick warehouses and factories around it, and you'll wind up at Comerica Park, where slugger Gary Sheffield is jerking his hands back and forth, squeezing his bat in his familiar preswing waggle as he waits for a batting practice pitch. There's a ferocious wind kicking up, gusting to 30 mph and adding distance to Sheffield's prodigious drives. After Sheffield is done with B.P., he stands and talks with hitting coach Lloyd McClendon.

Sheffield was acquired by the Tigers just two weeks after the team's World Series appearance last fall. Manager Jim Leyland acknowledged during the Series that the team lacked a "thumper," and Sheffield fits the bill—he has 456 career home runs. Just as the Indians hope Borowski can help solve their 2006 weakness (and just as the White Sox are hoping Darin Erstad can solve their problem in center field and the Twins are counting on pitchers Ramon Ortiz and Sidney Ponson to fill their rotation holes), the Tigers are betting their division



Erstad

JAY DROWNS / SN

hopes on the bat of the 38-year-old Sheffield. But he has struggled to adjust to the DH role and hit just .119 in his first 17 games. Thus, the extra conversations with McClendon. "It's just a timing thing with Gary right now," Leyland says. "I'm not worried."

Worrying would be understandable, though, when the margin between being division champions and sitting at home for the playoffs is small. The White Sox won 90 games last year but had to watch the division-winning Twins and wild-card Tigers in the post-season. The A.L. Central was the only division in the majors with three 90-win teams—no other division had even two.

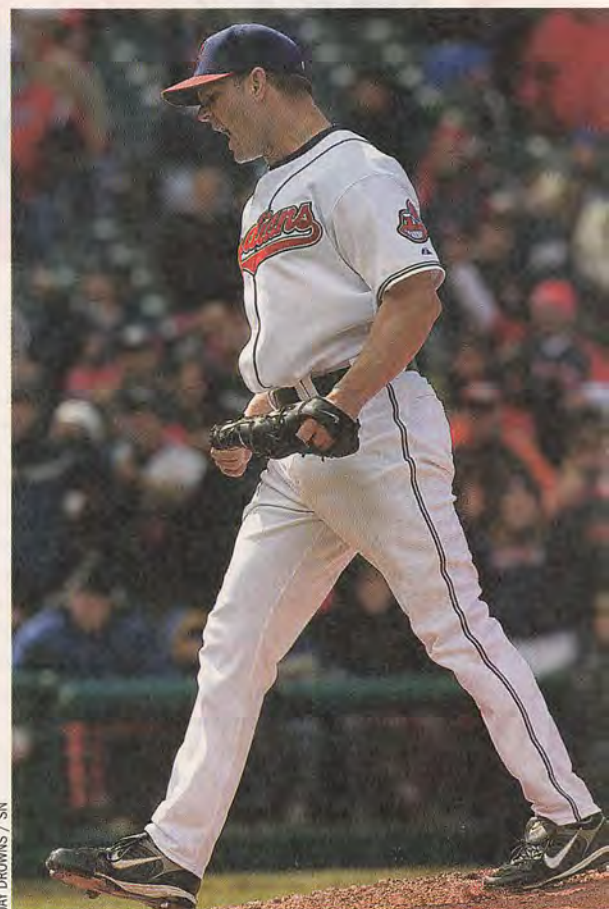
And there's pressure to win now. The division's days of dominance could be numbered. Go back to Santana, the A.L. Central poster boy. Unable to agree to an extension with Minnesota, he could be headed for the free-agent market after the 2008 season. If the \$126 million the Giants gave Barry Zito is any guide, Santana could command something in the \$130 million to \$140 million range. The Twins already are resigned to losing free-agent outfielder Torii Hunter, who is signed through 2007, and with Cuddyer and closer Joe Nathan also becoming free agents at the end of this season, the team figures to have only a short time together. "Free agency is tough," Ryan says. "But I have never felt restricted in terms of resigning our own guys. We'll have to see how things play out."

The Twins are not alone. The White Sox (whose payroll ranks fourth in the league but won't stay that way) are facing free-agent status for Buehrle, Garland, third baseman Joe Crede and slugger Jermaine Dye over the next two years. The Indians must figure out how to re-sign Sabathia and Hafner. The Tigers are the exception because most of their young core is locked up—only decisions on veteran pitchers Kenny Rogers and Todd Jones loom. But if the A.L. Central continues to be what it is, continues

to succeed by reflecting its modest markets, it's safe to assume that many of the division's best players will be elsewhere soon.

That's why Devil Rays executive VP Andrew Friedman rolls his eyes at the notion of a Central coronation. Try hanging in the neighborhood of the Yankees and Red Sox. "We're in what's clearly the toughest division in baseball," Friedman told SPORTING NEWS earlier this spring. "Even if you can make the argument for the A.L. Central now, it's not likely to last. All the divisions go through cycles except the A.L. East. It always will be good. We have two bellwethers that don't have cycles."

Maybe free-agent defections will deplete the Central. Conversely, maybe the teams will find ways to stay ahead by coming up with top



JAY DROWNS / SN

Borowski is being counted on to upgrade a bullpen that damaged the Indians' 2006 season.

players in their minor league systems to replace their losses. Regardless, for now, the Central remains baseball's toughest neighborhood, one in which the Twins, White Sox, Tigers and Indians figure to continue their four-way regional battle, with the Royals hoping to make gains. "It's been that way for the last few years," says Twins manager Ron Gardenhire. "From top to bottom, it's the best division. We're going to be knocking heads all year here. It's going to be a heck of a summer."

SN

There is pressure to win now. If the Central continues to succeed, many of the division's best players will be elsewhere soon.

Buckle up for our five draft simulations because we're



Maybe the first round of the 2007 NFL draft will be like a middle-aged man: thin up top, thick in the middle and full on the back end. Maybe the draft will be like a roller coaster—slow to develop (it has been years since the Senior Bowl, no?), then full of ups and downs and twists and turns that leave you out of breath but eager for another ride. Maybe this draft will be like a good M. Night Shyamalan movie (back before his head got so big)—you're on the edge of your seat the whole time, and by the end you have to rewatch the beginning and middle to figure out how you ended up where you did.

Maybe, maybe, maybe. Only one thing is certain: This draft ain't going to be normal—at least not if it goes anything like our mock drafts. That's right, *drafts*, plural. We did three, each with a different twist—one with SPORTING NEWS team correspondents (who knows their teams better?), one with five-star bloggers on SportingNews.com (who *thinks* they know their teams better?), and one with NFL projects editor Vinnie Iyer, whose impartial eye mapped out the “perfect” mock draft. Then our War Room scouts insisted on playing around with trades in yet another mock, and—just for fun—we drew names from a helmet in mock No. 5.

The fact those drafts hardly resemble one another speaks to the volatility of this year's class. For indisputable, inarguable, incontrovertible evidence this draft will be wacko,

consider the following: The Raiders and Lions pick first and second. When an entire draft rests on what Al Davis and Matt Millen do, you know it'll be nutty.

If the 2007 draft were a field of study, it would be *What-the-heck-just-happened-ology*. The best player, wide receiver Calvin Johnson, won't go first. The team that can't stop taking wide receivers—the Lions, who happen to be the worst team of this decade—thus will have the opportunity to take Johnson, but the Lions also will pass on him.

Not to him.

On him.

To recap, the two worst teams will have the opportunity to take the best player in the draft, yet there's a good chance neither will. One or both of the Raiders and Lions will trade down. In fact, so many teams want to trade down that the NFL might have to skip the first round entirely.

If you're not convinced this draft will be crazier than a room full of Daniel Snyders, consider this: Brady Quinn was long touted as the top prospect in this draft. But Quinn's draft stock tumbled, then rebounded, then tumbled again, to the point that it's anybody's guess where he will go. He could go early, as our correspondents' mock draft suggests. He could go late, if Iyer is on target. Or he could go somewhere in between, as our bloggers project.

Whatever happens, we'll be able to say we told you so. —Matt Crossman



all over the map—and so are the players



In this draft, our team correspondents don't grade the picks

The insiders' view



—they make them *By Matt Crossman*

All things considered, the SPORTING NEWS correspondents' mock draft went remarkably well. Writers for every team but Seattle were told to be available April 17 for a draft in which each would make the selection(s) for



CALVIN JOHNSON

The Lions are hoping like heck Johnson is available with the second pick—but not necessarily because they're intent on taking him.

BOB LEVERONE / SN (2)

the team he or she covers on a daily basis. It took five hours, and the result was 32 solid picks, at least a dozen whines about the inability to trade selections and these additional numbers:

4—“(Expletive), that’s who I was going to take!”

2—“Have a blessed day” answering machine messages.

1—Reference to Amobi Okoye as Christian Okoye.

1—Dropped cell phone call. (A shockingly low number. Do all these folks use Cingular?)

Before it was over, Brady Quinn was competing for a job with Charlie Frye, Paul Posluszny was in free fall and LaRon Landry was LaStarting for LaFalcons. But everything hinged on JaMarcus Russell’s becoming a Raider.

1 Raiders: JaMarcus Russell, QB, LSU

The Raiders are still second-guessing themselves for passing on Matt Leinart a year ago. They enter this year’s draft in even worse shape at quarterback, so they likely will resist the urge to draft Georgia Tech wide receiver Calvin Johnson, spurn all trade offers for the rights to the top pick and select Russell with the hope he can solve their deficiency at the most important position.

2 Lions: Calvin Johnson, WR, Georgia Tech

This is exactly what the Lions want—their whole draft plan rests on the Raiders’ taking Russell. The Lions have trade suitors who want Johnson, so expect them to deal the pick. They will trade down only a few spots because they want to take Clemson defensive end Gaines Adams and won’t move far enough to lose their chance at him. If Johnson goes first, the Lions will be forced to take Adams earlier than they would like because no one wants to trade up to take Russell.

3 Browns: Brady Quinn, QB, Notre Dame

How is it that Quinn’s every breath on a football field has been dissected for years yet nobody knows what to make of him? He was quarterback for Notre Stinkin’ Dame, for crying out loud, not some hayseed college

without its own TV contract. Anyway, Quinn is the draft’s mystery man. The Browns would take him because they lack confidence in Frye and see Quinn as a potential Tom Brady.

4 Bucs: Joe Thomas, OT, Wisconsin

The Bucs need a franchise left tackle to help them do a better job protecting their quarterbacks. Thomas could step in right away, but he wouldn’t have to because the Bucs have Luke Petitgout. Thomas is a powerful run blocker with quick feet and wouldn’t require much coaching.

5 Cardinals: Gaines Adams, DE, Clemson

The Cardinals need a pass-rushing end. They’ll try like heck to trade down because they like offensive tackle Levi Brown but don’t want to take him this early. They’ll be tempted by Oklahoma running back Adrian Peterson.

6 Redskins: Alan Branch, DT, Michigan

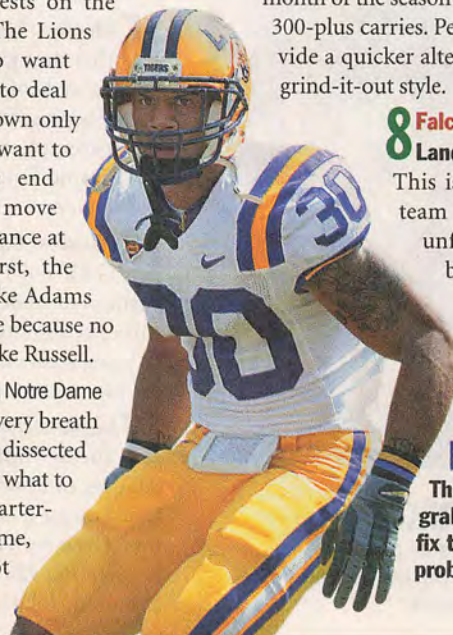
The Redskins need a big body in the middle who can push the pocket, stop the run and occupy blockers. Branch can do all of that. Though his stock has fallen lately, the team has always liked him. Amobi Okoye is the hot tackle in this draft, but it’s unlikely the Redskins will draft a 19-year-old. Joe Gibbs has pants older than that.

7 Vikings: Adrian Peterson, RB, Oklahoma

Peterson’s big-play ability would make it impossible for the Vikings to pass him up. Chester Taylor broke down in the final month of the season under the strain of 300-plus carries. Peterson would provide a quicker alternative to Taylor’s grind-it-out style.

8 Falcons: LaRon Landry, S, LSU

This is exactly how the team hopes the draft unfolds. Safety has been a trouble spot for the Falcons the past few years. By taking



LaRON LANDRY

The Falcons will grab a guy who can fix their pesky problems at safety.

Landry, they will have a leader in the secondary for years to come. He can play free or strong safety.

9 Dolphins: Levi Brown, OT, Penn State

If Quinn, Landry and Branch are gone, the Dolphins would go with Brown over Ohio State wideout Ted Ginn. Brown's experience in a big-time program is important. So are the size and smarts he has to handle left tackle.

10 Texans: Joe Staley, OT, Central Michigan

Staley has shot up the charts in recent weeks, and the Texans have fallen in love with him. They like his speed, which is important because Houston's system values it more than other teams' schemes do. The Texans must provide protection for Matt Schaub, who is even less mobile than David Carr.

11 49ers: Adam Carriker, DE, Nebraska

The 49ers need help on the front line to complete their transition to a 3-4 scheme. Carriker (6-6, 291) is big enough to stand up against the run at end and strong enough to move inside and push the pocket on pass plays. Moreover, he's a solid tackler—and shoddy tackling was one of the 49ers' biggest problems last year.



ADAM CARRIKER

Regardless of where he lines up, Carriker would get the job done in the trenches for the Niners.

12 Bills: Patrick Willis, ILB, Mississippi

The Bills need a running back and would be tempted by California's Marshawn Lynch, but they can get a good back in the second round. Willis' speed and athleticism would give the team flexibility. He's a natural middle linebacker, but he's fast enough to play outside.

13 Rams: Amobi Okoye, DT, Louisville

This is a slam dunk for the Rams, who need defensive line help in the worst way. Okoye may not be a true nose tackle, but the Rams would find a way to use him. He is bright and mature with a high motor, playmaking ability and huge upside.

14 Panthers: Ted Ginn, WR-KR, Ohio State

The Panthers need someone to complement Steve Smith and be a long-term replacement for Keyshawn Johnson. Ginn could be a very good third receiver right away. He also would add explosiveness to the return game—a weakness last season.

15 Steelers: Leon Hall, CB, Michigan

He's strong against the run and fits the Steelers' style of defense. They need help at corner because Deshaea Townsend is coming off an average year, Ike Taylor was benched and Ricardo Colclough is recovering from a neck injury.

16 Packers: Darrelle Revis, CB, Pitt

G.M. Ted Thompson is in the perfect position to trade down, and that remains a strong possibility. Revis would help bolster an aging secondary. He's a cover corner who can play in the team's man-to-man system.

17 Jaguars: Jamaal Anderson, DE, Arkansas

The Jags' front office would like to send a bouquet of flowers to Carolina for drafting Ginn because if he were on the board, the club would have been tempted to draft yet another receiver. Put Anderson with tackles Marcus Stroud and John Henderson and the defensive



DWAYNE BOWE The Titans already have a young stud to throw the ball; in Bowe, they'd get a speedy star to catch it.

line would become one of the league's best.

18 Bengals: Reggie Nelson, S, Florida

The Bengals really want Revis, but they wouldn't turn down a playmaking safety who could bolster their weak secondary. Nelson fits the mold of Sean Taylor and Troy Polamalu and is good enough to start at strong safety by midseason.

19 Titans: Dwayne Bowe, WR, LSU

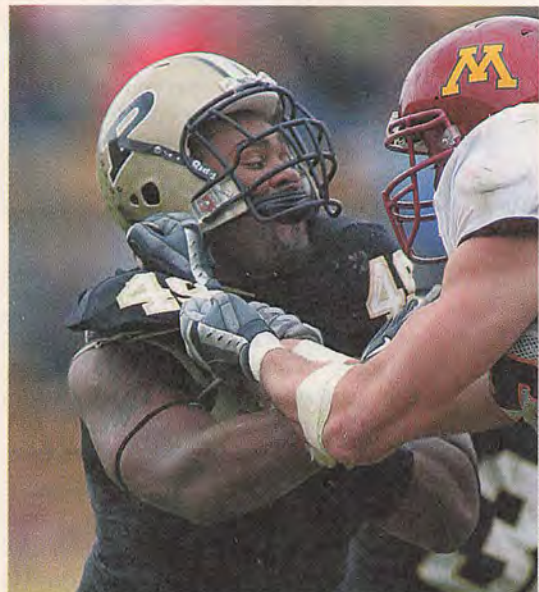
Tennessee is in dire need of a receiver after losing its top two in the free-agent market. The team says it will surround quarterback Vince Young with playmakers. That strategy begins with this pick.

20 Giants: Aaron Ross, CB, Texas

The Giants want an outside linebacker but think they can get a good one in the second round. The secondary is the next biggest problem spot—and Ross has the size and speed to step right in and compete for a starting job.

21 Broncos: Anthony Spencer, DE, Purdue
With Branch, Carriker, Willis, Anderson and Nelson all gone, that sound you just heard was Mike Shanahan pounding the table in dismay. Spencer lacks ideal height, but he made plays in the backfield his senior season by using quickness, solid technique and high intensity.

ANTHONY SPENCER He may not be the biggest end, but Spencer finds ways to create a mess in the backfield.



22 Cowboys: Jarvis Moss, DE, Florida
The Cowboys will try like crazy to trade out of this spot. To make the 3-4 work, they need another pass rusher. They might try to convert Moss to outside linebacker and hope to have the same success they have had with DeMarcus Ware.

23 Chiefs: Marcus McCauley, CB, Fresno State
The team wants to get younger at cornerback. It wants Ross but would settle for McCauley (6-0 $\frac{3}{4}$, 203), who is fast, big and a good tackler. Kansas City corners must be able to tackle and play well against the run. McCauley can do both.

24 Patriots: Jon Beason, OLB, Miami
Coach Bill Belichick isn't big on drafting linebackers high, but Beason is fast and fierce. The vaunted Patriots staff could make Beason a star by teaching him to play under control.

25 Jets: Justin Blalock, G/T, Texas
The Jets put a huge emphasis on character, so they'll take the best available 300-pound Boy Scout. They want to draft a corner, but they aren't crazy about anybody left at this point. Blalock is very smart and could help at two positions.

26 Eagles: Greg Olsen, TE, Miami
The team would be shocked if Paul Posluszny were available. Our Eagles correspondent-G.M. stands ready to drive to Happy Valley himself, grab Posluszny and take him to Philly. (Now *that* would be crazy!) But the Eagles haven't taken a linebacker in the first round since 1979, and that won't change this year. L.J. Smith likely will be gone after this season, and Olsen is a great pass-catching tight end, perfect for the West Coast offense.

27 Saints: Chris Houston, CB, Arkansas
Cornerback is the Saints' biggest need, and Houston appears to be a great fit. The Saints use a lot of man-to-man coverage, and Houston played primarily man at Arkansas, where he held his own against some of the top receivers in the country.


28 Patriots: Tanard Jackson, CB, Syracuse
Jackson has the skills to start in any scheme, which is convenient because New England is apt to run just about anything week to week. He's a lot like Eugene Wilson, who would be his teammate in the secondary.

29 Ravens: Tony Ugoh, OT, Arkansas
Jonathan Ogden likely will retire at the end of this season, so the Ravens are looking for his replacement. Ugoh has elite skills but didn't always use them in college. His best attribute is his mobility—and he doesn't have any glaring weaknesses.

30 Chargers: Paul Posluszny, LB, Penn State
The Chargers are deep across the board, so they can afford to draft for depth. Posluszny is a tackling machine and has many of the same skills as recently departed Donnie Edwards.

31 Bears: Ben Grubbs, G, Auburn
Grubbs is a good athlete who has unusual quickness that allows him to pull and lead outside runs. His big weakness is inconsistency.

32 Colts: Robert Meachem, WR, Tennessee
The Colts have several needs after losing so many players in the offseason. Though the defense needs help, Bill Polian has made it clear he will not allow the offense to slip—and Meachem would fill the need for a third receiver to go with Marvin Harrison and Reggie Wayne. **SN**

 Check out the latest seven-round mock draft in the Pro Football War Room, which features live draft analysis all weekend long from War Room scouts and team correspondents. Go to sportingnews.com/nfl/warroom.

It's so easy, an editor could do it

In an attempt to highlight the difficulty of predicting this year's draft, we wanted to hire a chimp to make predictions. We figured he'd get as many right as anybody. Then we found out chimps cost, at the very least, \$500 an hour for a minimum of two hours. So we opted for the next best thing: SPORTING News editor John Rawlings pulled names out of a helmet. —M.C.

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Raiders: Patrick Willis, ILB, Mississippi | 17. Jaguars: Dwayne Jarrett, WR, USC |
| 2. Lions: Gaines Adams, DE, Clemson | 18. Bengals: Paul Posluszny, OLB, Penn State |
| 3. Browns: Lawrence Timmons, OLB, Florida State | 19. Titans: Marshawn Lynch, RB, California |
| 4. Bucs: Calvin Johnson, WR, Georgia Tech | 20. Giants: Tanard Jackson, CB, Syracuse |
| 5. Cardinals: Jon Beason, OLB, Miami | 21. Broncos: Anthony Spencer, DE, Purdue |
| 6. Redskins: Levi Brown, OT, Penn State | 22. Cowboys: Adrian Peterson, RB, Oklahoma |
| 7. Vikings: Brandon Meriweather, S, Miami | 23. Chiefs: Jarvis Moss, DE, Florida |
| 8. Falcons: Darrelle Revis, CB, Pitt | 24. Patriots: Daymeion Hughes, CB, California |
| 9. Dolphins: Ted Ginn, WR-KR, Ohio State | 25. Jets: Adam Carriker, DE, Nebraska |
| 10. Texans: Reggie Nelson, S, Florida | 26. Eagles: Marcus McCauley, CB, Fresno State |
| 11. 49ers: JaMarcus Russell, QB, LSU | 27. Saints: LaRon Landry, S, LSU |
| 12. Bills: Robert Meachem, WR, Tennessee | 28. Patriots: Michael Griffin, S, Texas |
| 13. Rams: Greg Olsen, TE, Miami | 29. Ravens: Clark Harris, TE, Rutgers |
| 14. Panthers: DeMarcus "Tank" Tyler, DT, N.C. State | 30. Chargers: Aundrae Allison, WR, East Carolina |
| 15. Steelers: Chris Houston, CB, Arkansas | 31. Bears: Tony Ugoh, OT, Arkansas |
| 16. Packers: Aaron Ross, CB, Texas | 32. Colts: Jamaal Anderson, DE, Arkansas |

If NFL teams knew what was best for them, they'd pick these

A perfect mockery

There are many factors that influence the actual first-round decisions—fan-placating owners, position-biased coaches and second-guessing talking heads among them—but good NFL decision makers block out all outside elements and make the smart choice for the long term.

And these are the selections every team *should* make, even if it means passing on a certain Notre Dame quarterback in the top 10:

1 Raiders: JaMarcus Russell, QB, LSU
At the top, the Raiders need to make a big splash—and Russell's big arm and big body also happen to fill Oakland's biggest need.

2 Lions: Gaines Adams, DE, Clemson
The Lions love Adams' pass-rush skills but would prefer to trade down to take him. Why not show him a little love and just pick him here?

3 Browns: Adrian Peterson, RB, Oklahoma
It makes little sense to draft Brady Quinn because the Browns have bigger problems than their quarterback spot. Unlike Quinn, Peterson would give them an explosive playmaker immediately; Jamal Lewis won't break long runs.

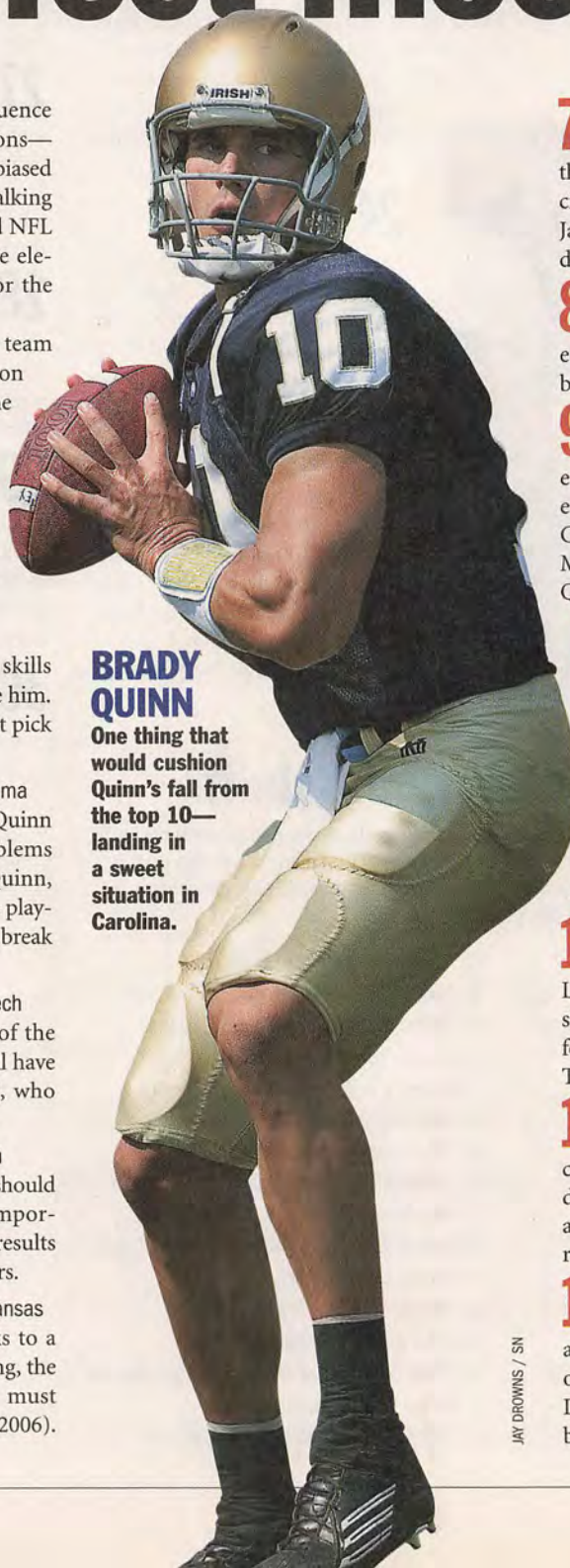
4 Bucs: Calvin Johnson, WR, Georgia Tech
The fact the three teams in front of the Bucs are needier at other positions will have Jon Gruden drooling over this stud, who could resuscitate Tampa Bay's offense.

5 Cardinals: Joe Thomas, OT, Wisconsin
Ken Whisenhunt and Russ Grimm should know from their Steelers days how important line play is in getting maximum results from the talents of offensive skill players.

6 Redskins: Jamaal Anderson, DE, Arkansas
With no other Day 1 picks thanks to a wave of ludicrous trading and spending, the Redskins can't mess around. They must boost their pass rush (only 19 sacks in 2006).

BRADY QUINN

One thing that would cushion Quinn's fall from the top 10—landing in a sweet situation in Carolina.



7 Vikings: Leon Hall, CB, Michigan

Taking Quinn would be a mistake when the team already might have something special in talented 2006 second-rounder Tarvaris Jackson. The secondary needs improved depth to help an atrocious pass defense.

8 Falcons: LaRon Landry, S, LSU

In this draft class, Landry is the defensive equivalent of Johnson or Peterson—a good bet to make his presence felt early as a rookie.

9 Dolphins: Levi Brown, OT, Penn State

Quinn wouldn't be the right choice here, either, assuming the team lands Chiefs veteran quarterback Trent Green to pair with Cleo Lemon, a developing player. Instead, Miami should worry about protecting its QBs better.

10 Texans: Ted Ginn, WR-KR, Ohio State

Remember when Houston whiffed on a chance to get a dynamic open-field athlete last year? This would make amends for that. Ginn and Andre Johnson? Wow.

11 49ers: Alan Branch, DT, Michigan

Slowly but surely, Mike Nolan is building a good 3-4 defense. One of the few missing pieces is a massive nose tackle. Enter Branch.

12 Bills: Patrick Willis, ILB, Mississippi

This one's easy. Willis could replace London Fletcher-Baker, now with the Redskins, in the middle and also help make up for the speed playmaking outside linebacker Takeo Spikes provided.

13 Rams: Amobi Okoye, DT, Louisville

If at first, second or third you don't succeed ... Okoye, the youngest player in the draft, has too much upside to be a major disappointment like the Rams' recent first-round picks at this position.

14 Panthers: Brady Quinn, QB, Notre Dame

Now here's a place for Quinn. Think about it: Jake Delhomme is 32 and coming off a shaky season, and you can't bank on David Carr. Besides, wouldn't Quinn be a better bet to succeed if he joined a solid,

JAY DROWNS / SN

players in Round 1 *By Vinnie Iyer*

veteran team and was groomed to start in Year 3? It worked pretty well for Philip Rivers.

15 Steelers: Lawrence Timmons, OLB, Florida State

The Steelers are in a delicate situation on defense—their traditional 3-4 might morph into a 4-3. Timmons' skills and versatility are made-to-order for such a transition.

16 Packers: Greg Olsen, TE, Miami

With a good zone-blocking system in place and a back (Ver-nand Morency) who is well-suited for it, why waste this high of a pick on running back Marshawn Lynch, who comes with character/durability concerns? Give Brett Favre a unique, athletic receiving target instead.

17 Jaguars: Reggie Nelson, S, Florida

Deon Grant left for Seattle, Donovan Darius will turn 32 this season and is coming off a broken leg, and Gerald Sensabaugh has had off-field problems. Nelson is a big-play safety who fills both a position need and a statistical need—for more takeaways.

18 Bengals: Aaron Ross, CB, Texas

Character has to be a concern for Cincy, doesn't it? Taking players with good reps should be as high a priority as improving the pass defense; Ross would solve both problems.

19 Titans: Dwayne Bowe, WR, LSU

Quick, name a reliable Titans wide receiver now that Drew Bennett has left town. Thought so. Watching Vince Young throw to Bowe would be so much fun.

20 Giants: Paul Posluszny, OLB, Penn State

One veteran Linebacker U. alum, LaVar Arrington, didn't pan out in New York, but this rookie model would come in hungry and ready to work.

21 Broncos: Jarvis Moss, DE, Florida

With too many former Browns, Denver's defensive line wore down late last

season. It's time to inject Moss' size (6-6½, 258) and athleticism.

22 Cowboys: Darrelle Revis, CB, Pitt

The Cowboys got their need for a safety out of the way by signing Ken Hamlin; now they can get a field-ready nickel back to



JAMAAL ANDERSON The Redskins were woefully short on sacks-appeal last season, which makes Anderson all the more appealing at No. 6.

further help their downfield coverage.

23 Chiefs: Daymeion Hughes, CB, California

Hughes won't wow anyone on the track, but you don't need to be a blazer to do well in Herm Edwards' system.

24 Patriots: Brandon Meriweather, S, Miami

If the Pats are satisfied with the forecast for Meriweather's character, they will get an aggressive all-around safety—one with much fresher legs than Rodney Harrison's.

25 Jets: Chris Houston, CB, Arkansas

New York already has proved it likes to turn on the jets at corner with Andre Dyson and Justin Miller, and Houston's fleet feet would recharge the depth at the position.

26 Eagles: Charles Johnson, DE, Georgia

Philly is set at right end with pass rushers Trent Cole and Juqua Thomas. But it can't count on its left ends—Jevon Kearse, Darren Howard and Jerome McDougle—because of past injury problems.

27 Saints: Marcus McCauley, CB, Fresno State

In addition to sharing alliterative names, McCauley has a build similar to Saints corner Mike McKenzie's and can increase the team's playmaking quotient.

28 Patriots: Tanard Jackson, CB, Syracuse

I don't think Bill Belichick would be disappointed if he got a physical corner to go with an attack-mode safety in Round 1, do you?

29 Ravens: Tony Ugoh, OT, Arkansas

A no-brainer. The team lost right tackle Tony Pashos to Jacksonville and might lose left tackle Jonathan Ogden to retirement.

30 Chargers: Robert Meachem, WR, Tennessee

The Chargers have productive pass catchers in LaDainian Tomlinson, Antonio Gates and up-and-comer Vincent Jackson. Imagine how Meachem's speed would spark their passing game.

31 Bears: Justin Blalock, G/T, Texas

The Bears are getting up there in age at both guard and tackle, so why not get a prospect who can be groomed to start at either position?

32 Colts: Jon Beason, OLB, Miami

Just call him Jon "Cato Clone" Beason, whose speed and athleticism are ideal for the weak side of Tony Dungy's Tampa 2. He can replace Cato June.

SN

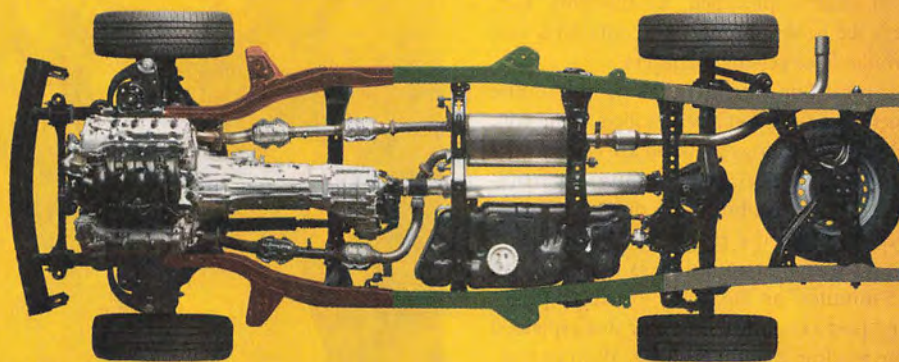
BIGGEST ADVANC TECHNOLOGY SIN



¹Before towing, confirm your vehicle and trailer are compatible, hooked up and loaded properly and that you have any necessary additional equipment. Do not exceed any Weight Ratings and follow all instructions in your Owner's Manual. The maximum you can tow depends on the total weight of any cargo, occupants and available equipment. ²4x2 Regular Cab Long Bed with available 5.7L V8 and Tow Package. Vehicle shown with available equipment. ©2007 Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc.

E IN FRAME CE BOLTS.

INTRODUCING THE ALL-NEW FULL-SIZE TUNDRA. It would've been simple to give Tundra a fully boxed frame from stem to stern. That's the way some ½-tons do it. But Tundra isn't other trucks. It was engineered from a clean sheet of paper, with no ties to tradition. The result is the new TripleTech™ frame. It uses three types of design, materials and construction to create an optimal combination of strength, ride quality and durability.



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Three sections, one durable truck. Look at the cross sections of the frame and you'll see how each is designed for a different purpose. One thing they share: the strength and stamina to help ensure Tundra's available 5.7L V8 is capable of towing up to 10,800 lbs.^{1,2}

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THE TRUCK THAT'S CHANGING IT ALL.



TUNDRA

So, pal, you think you could run your team's draft? Thirty-one of

The people's choice

When it comes to player personnel—especially relating to the draft—fans always think they know best. And you had better believe SportingNews.com is home to some incredibly passionate and knowledgeable sports fans. (Read a few of their blogs and you'll see.) So this year, as the NFL draft approached, we thought: "Hey, let's see how SportingNews.com's NFL fans would do as general managers."

So on one April day, 31 of our online members—not just any members, mind you, but five-star bloggers (who are rated as the elite in our special community)—participated in a live online mock draft. The members took on the role of G.M. for the 31 teams with first-round picks. Each fan had 15 minutes "on the clock" to select a player and post a comment on a blog that explained the wisdom behind the pick. With participants from as far away as Scotland and Germany, the draft unfolded like this.

1 **Raiders:** JaMarcus Russell, QB, LSU

Chosen by user REIGNBLOOD: The safe bet is Brady Quinn; the hype is Russell. Russell possesses terrific size (6-5, 256) and a rocket arm and has amazing upside. Raiders Nation would make the J. Russell jersey an instant No. 1 hot seller.

2 **Lions:** Calvin Johnson, WR, Georgia Tech

UGLYJERRY: Calvin Johnson is the only sure thing in the draft. The Lions need defense, but the way to keep that unit off the field is with a superior offense—and that's what Johnson would give them.

3 **Browns:** Joe Thomas, OT, Wisconsin

snwolf1960: Thomas, who is 6-6½, 311 pounds, is athletic and intelligent. Drafting him would prevent the Browns from having to shuffle newly acquired guard Eric Steinbach to tackle.

4 **Bucs:** Gaines Adams, DE, Clemson

mojomike: If Johnson and Thomas are gone, it would make sense to take Adams to improve a position where the incumbent



TED GINN
Despite his lack of polish, Ginn could fill Minnesota's playmaking void in 4.38 seconds.

ALBERT DICKSON / SN

the middle of the D-line. Okoye has all the tools to become an elite interior lineman—something the Redskins urgently need.

7 **Vikings:** Ted Ginn, WR-KR, Ohio State

jameeman: The Vikings have a dearth of playmaking wide receivers. Ginn is raw and will drop passes, but focus can be taught; 4.38 speed and rare athletic ability can't.

8 **Falcons:** LaRon Landry, S, LSU

The Boondocks: Landry is a beast who can hit, run and catch. He can shadow a tight end or a slot receiver. He would join DeAngelo Hall and Jimmy Williams to make us good in the secondary for years.

9 **Dolphins:** Brady Quinn, QB, Notre Dame

Hoo da man: Quinn has four years of starting experience, including two under Charlie Weis and his pro scheme. He has great size, a good arm and terrific on-field intelligence. Despite concerns about weak performances against elite teams, he would be a tremendous value at No. 9.

10 **Texans:** Adrian Peterson, RB, Oklahoma

dtrump5560: The Texans need a future franchise back and someone to spell the aging Ahman Green. Peterson would give us this.

11 **49ers:** Leon Hall, CB, Michigan

boneyjames: Hall finished 2006 with 45 tackles, two tackles for loss, one sack, three picks, 15 pass breakups and two fumble recoveries. This is what the weak Niners defense needs—and he also can return punts.

starter is aging. Adams is a terrific pass rusher who has been compared to Simeon Rice. Adams could learn from the man himself.

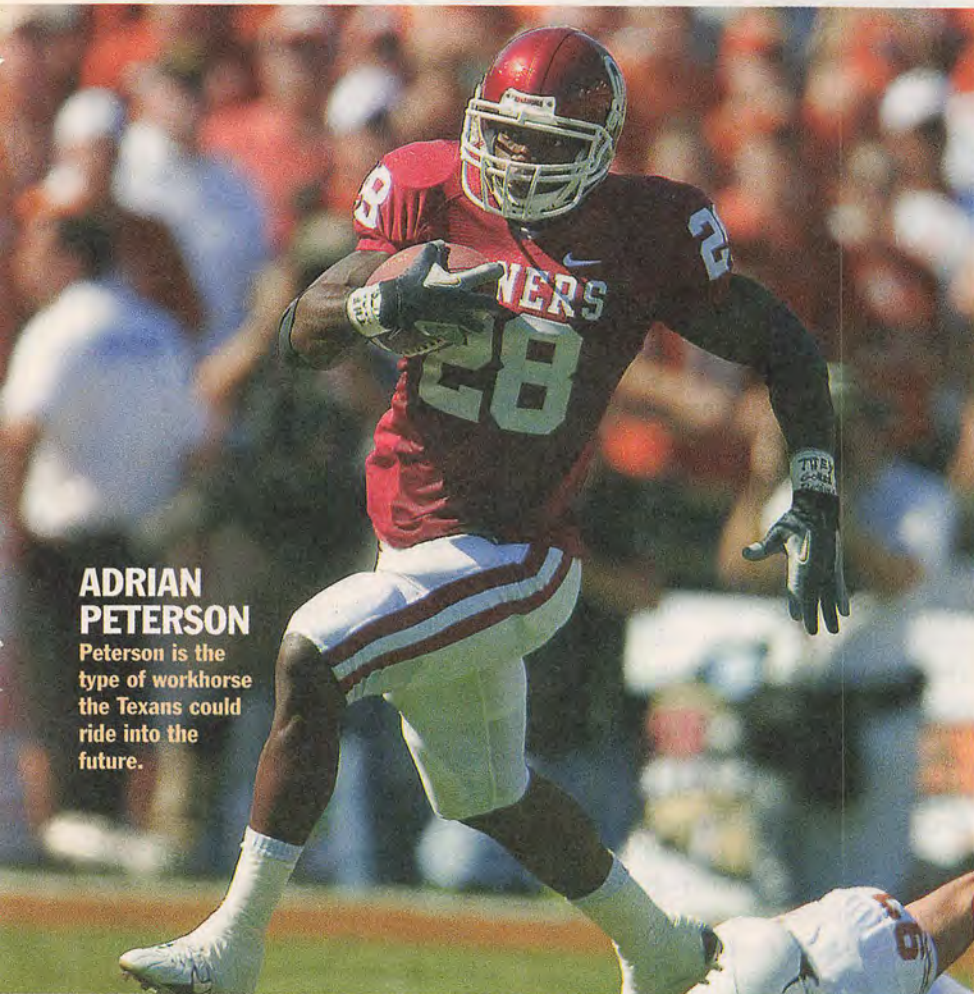
5 **Cardinals:** Levi Brown, OT, Penn State

klacs01: The Cardinals' most glaring weakness is the offensive line. They need to make it as strong as possible.

6 **Redskins:** Amobi Okoye, DT, Louisville

suntzu4m: The Redskins were undone last season by weaknesses at linebacker and in

SportingNews.com's five-star bloggers set out to prove they could.



ADRIAN PETERSON

Peterson is the type of workhorse the Texans could ride into the future.



JARVIS MOSS

Why should the Rams settle for a player who's good at one position when Moss could be a plus at three?

***12 Bills:** Patrick Willis, ILB, Mississippi Genny Light: With the loss of London Fletcher-Baker and Takeo Spikes, the Bills have glaring holes at linebacker. Willis is the best middle linebacker in the country and has great athleticism and skills.

13 Rams: Jarvis Moss, DE, Florida MD80891: It was real hard to pass on Adam Carriker and Jamaal Anderson, but I figure Moss could help at three positions: outside and inside 'backer and defensive end. He has the potential to be the next Ted Hendricks.

14 Panthers: Greg Olsen, TE, Miami airdave: He would be the perfect fit for an offense that has been crying out for a pass-catching tight end. One more weapon

**A SportingNews.com staff member made the initial Bills pick when Genny Light was stuck on the road without cell service. But our pick and Genny Light's pick matched, so we let him make his case for Patrick Willis.*

REIGNBLOOD doesn't need face paint. He bleeds Silver and Black.

The first fan/G.M. on the clock for the SportingNews.com community mock draft was none other than well-known poster, blogger and ardent Raiders fan REIGNBLOOD. For this draft, he agreed to come out from behind his username and reveal his true identity: Mark Kauffman of Buffalo.

A Raiders fan since Oakland beat Philadelphia in Super Bowl 15, Kauffman says the team's mystique drew him in. He says fans and analysts too quickly forget that the Raiders were a Super Bowl-caliber team just five years ago and that four consecutive losing seasons don't diminish four decades of Silver and Black glory under Al Davis.

Kauffman says he agonized over the No. 1 pick—JaMarcus Russell, Brady Quinn or Calvin Johnson. But in the end, he decided, "The Raiders have a win-win situation with whomever they select."

A fantasy football player since 1994, Kauffman is a veteran fantasy drafter, and he enjoys video games, too. "I take sadistic delight in crushing opponents with the 'lowly' Raiders in the Madden football video games," he says.

Though he says he doesn't own any silver or black face paint, Kauffman is considering getting the Raiders shield tattooed on his back. That's dedication.

—Kathy Sheldon



Kauffman

could be the key to turning this team around.

15 Steelers: Lawrence Timmons, OLB, Florida State

((((KG)))): With the loss of Joey Porter, Timmons would fill the Steelers' most pressing need. He has the speed to blitz from the edge and is an explosive hitter. He would fit in the

Steelers' 3-4 defense but could adapt to the 4-3 if Mike Tomlin changes schemes.

16 Packers: Clark Harris, TE, Rutgers
silverstar294: Harris is a talented, intelligent tight end with dependable hands who would fit perfectly in Mike McCarthy's system. At 6-5½, 256, Harris would give Brett Favre a huge target.

17 Jaguars: Reggie Nelson, S, Florida
Dave184: With the loss of Deon Grant, the Jags need help in the secondary. Nelson is an aggressive, physical player with good speed and quickness.

18 Bengals: Paul Posluszny, OLB, Penn State
goffchille: With the departure of Brian Simmons, the Bengals need to shore up the linebacker position, and Posluszny fits the bill. He is aggressive, strong and quick to the ball. He is solid in run support and a decent blitzer and coverage guy.

19 Titans: Dwayne Bowe, WR, LSU
DaDo: The Titans and Vince Young need a threat on offense, and Bowe will be a fine receiver for years to come. He has soft hands and knows how to use his frame to ward off defenders. At 6-2, 221, he will create matchup problems for corners.

20 Giants: Darrelle Revis, CB, Pittsburgh
kraz33: The Giants are small at cornerback and always seem to lose a couple early in the season. With his explosiveness, heart and superstar-quality punt return ability, Revis (5-11½, 196) is the man for the job.

21 Broncos: Dwayne Jarrett, WR, USC
DODGERS N BRONCOS: We were in the bottom third of total offense, but Jarrett could take us over the top.

22 Cowboys: Michael Griffin, S, Texas
Texaz: Griffin has shown his leadership ability and would fill the Cowboys' greatest need by providing a complement to strong safety Roy Williams. He would let Williams return to playing near the line—the job he does best.

23 Chiefs: Alan Branch, DT, Michigan
crummings: I jumped on Branch to avoid ending up with a tackle/end 'tweener



RICK BOWMER / AP

SABBY PISCITELLI Versatility is Piscitelli's middle name—and a heck of a lot easier to say than his last name. Regardless, he'd be a good fit in Philly.

in Round 2. Branch helps stop the run and occupies blockers as a pass rusher, which would allow Jared Allen and Tamba Hali to get more sacks.

24 Patriots: Aaron Ross, CB, Texas
Lester's Legends: Ross would help fill a need in the secondary and give the team leverage if Asante Samuel holds out. Ross has decent speed (4.46) and is a good hitter. He would help immediately in nickel and dime packages and on special teams.

25 Jets: Chris Houston, CB, Arkansas
sashidov: He's a little short and a little light, but he runs a 4.33 40 and shut down some top wide receivers this year. And Eric Mangini can develop talent.

26 Eagles: Sabby Piscitelli, S/OLB, Oregon State
soadrules1313: The Eagles need help for Brian Dawkins, and Piscitelli has good playmaking ability, range and closing speed. He also has proved equally effective playing deep in zones or inside the box as a run stuffer. He has been compared to Adam Archuleta.

27 Saints: Jamaal Anderson, DE, Arkansas
bjsechamps: The Saints would be happy to get a talented player at No. 27. Anderson combines size, strength and ath-

leticism to provide a scary force off the edge. He would be insurance for Charles Grant, who was given the franchise tag and could be a free agent next year.

28 Patriots: Brandon Meriweather, S, Miami
Lester's Legends: With Meriweather, the Patriots would add speed (4.48), toughness (nine tackles per game the past two years) and youth to an aging position. This would prove to be a steal after Rodney Harrison took Meriweather under his wing.

29 Ravens: Justin Blalock, G/T, Texas
akil123: Blalock, a 6-3, 321-pound force, has the ability to play guard and tackle. With starters Tony Pashos and Edwin Mulitalo moving on as free agents and Jonathan Ogden possibly retiring, the Ravens need to address the offensive line early.

30 Chargers: Robert Meachem, WR, Tennessee
str8change: If there ever were a perfect time for the Chargers to use the "best player available" strategy, this would be the year. Meachem has great raw speed and the ability to stretch the field, and he is a big target who is surprisingly strong (benches 345 pounds).

31 Bears: Zach Miller, TE, Arizona State
IRISH22: Miller has the size and ability to make the tight end position relevant in the Windy City for the first time since ... Da Coach!

32 Colts: DeMarcus "Tank" Tyler, DT, N.C. State
matbud8: The run defense was ranked 32nd last year, and Tyler has the superior upper-body strength to move blockers out of the way. His quick first step will lead to a lot of tackles and hopefully some much-needed sacks. **SN**

Next time, **YOU** be the G.M.

Do you have the smarts (and the guts) to draft for your team? You could be selected for our next bloggers mock draft. But first you have to start earning your stars.

SportingNews.com members are rated on a five-star system. The number of stars a member receives depends on a formula that includes, among other things, fantasy participation, community involvement and performance in all areas (maybe even mock drafts now).

Join our free community and you could be on the clock next time around. Go to members.sportingnews.com/member.

We'll trade one final mock for your indulgence of our scouts

We admit it; our War Room scouts needed a change. They've been doing mock drafts in the Pro Football War Room (sportingnews.com/nfl/warroom) since, what, September? And not one of them has involved trades. Finally, we had to let them project a few trades.

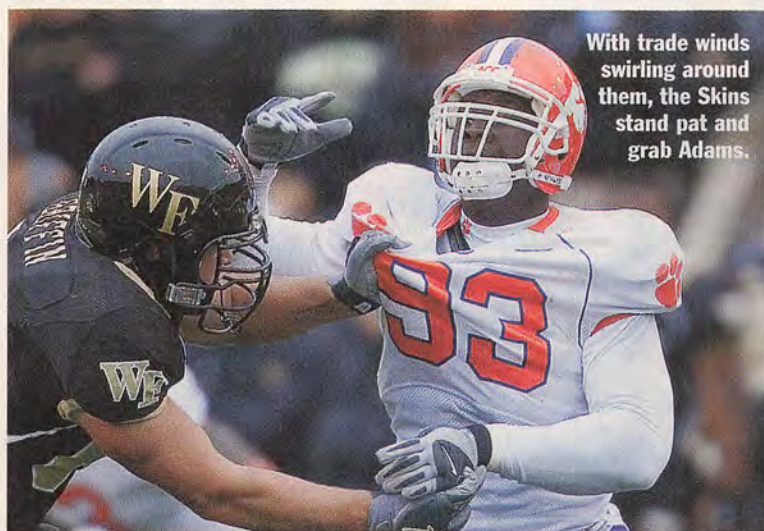
So try this mock draft on for size. These draft-day trades sure would shake things up a bit:

■ The Raiders need a quarterback, but they will trade down to take the more pro-ready Brady Quinn because Al Davis doesn't have the patience to wait for JaMarcus Russell to develop. Cleveland G.M. Phil Savage, on the other hand, will be thrilled to take Rus-

sell, whom he has known going back to high school camps in Mobile, Ala.

■ Desperate for an offensive jumpstart, the Bucs will move up to the second spot to take Calvin Johnson. The Lions, meanwhile, will get Simeon Rice as part of the deal so they can pass on Gaines Adams in favor of stud offensive tackle Joe Thomas.

■ The Titans will move up three spots (to No. 16) to grab defensive end Jamaal Anderson while the Packers—disappointed that running back Marshawn Lynch was taken by Buffalo at No. 12—can move down and still get Ted Ginn, a marvelous target for Brett Favre. —War Room scouts



With trade winds swirling around them, the Skins stand pat and grab Adams.

BOB LEVERONE / SN

1. **Browns** (from Raiders): **JaMarcus Russell**, QB, LSU
2. **Bucs** (from Lions): **Calvin Johnson**, WR, Georgia Tech
3. **Raiders** (from Browns): **Brady Quinn**, QB, Notre Dame
4. **Lions** (from Bucs): **Joe Thomas**, OT, Wisconsin
5. **Cardinals**: **Adrian Peterson**, RB, Oklahoma
6. **Redskins**: **Gaines Adams**, DE, Clemson
7. **Vikings**: **Leon Hall**, CB, Michigan
8. **Falcons**: **LaRon Landry**, S, LSU
9. **Dolphins**: **Levi Brown**, OT, Penn State
10. **Texans**: **Dwayne Bowe**, WR, LSU
11. **49ers**: **Alan Branch**, DT, Michigan
12. **Bills**: **Marshawn Lynch**, RB, California
13. **Rams**: **Amobi Okoye**, DT, Louisville
14. **Panthers**: **Patrick Willis**, ILB, Mississippi
15. **Steelers**: **Paul Posluszny**, OLB, Penn State
16. **Titans** (from Packers): **Jamaal Anderson**, DE, Arkansas
17. **Jaguars**: **Reggie Nelson**, S, Florida
18. **Bengals**: **Darrelle Revis**, CB, Pitt
19. **Packers** (from Titans): **Ted Ginn**, WR-KR, Ohio State
20. **Giants**: **Tanard Jackson**, CB, Syracuse
21. **Broncos**: **Adam Carriker**, DE, Nebraska
22. **Cowboys**: **Jarvis Moss**, DE, Florida
23. **Chiefs**: **Aaron Ross**, CB, Texas
24. **Patriots**: **Brandon Meriweather**, S, Miami
25. **Jets**: **Chris Houston**, CB, Arkansas
26. **Eagles**: **Charles Johnson**, DE, Georgia
27. **Saints**: **Marcus McCauley**, CB, Fresno State
28. **Patriots**: **David Harris**, ILB, Michigan
29. **Ravens**: **Tony Ugoh**, OT, Arkansas
30. **Chargers**: **Aundrae Allison**, WR, East Carolina
31. **Bears**: **Greg Olsen**, TE, Miami
32. **Colts**: **Jon Beason**, OLB, Miami

Playing the 'what if' game

Fantasy owners will be paying close attention as the NFL draft unfolds. Where a player lands greatly affects how he performs as a rookie. These are some scenarios owners could be dreaming about.

What will happen if ...

... **RB Adrian Peterson goes to Cleveland?** With Peterson, Romeo Crennel can imitate his former team again—Peterson as Laurence Maroney and Jamal Lewis as Corey Dillon. The Browns will prepare Peterson for the starting role while letting Lewis take the heavy pounding. Peterson gradually will get more work, but owners won't be able to rely on him as a weekly fantasy starter because of the Browns' weak passing attack.

... **Peterson goes to Minnesota?** Brad Childress can stick with his running back-reliant approach without running Chester Taylor into the ground. The two backs will complement each other well, with Peterson supplying the inside power and Taylor providing an experienced option in the passing game. Without help at wide receiver, though, Minnesota's backs will face loaded defensive

fronts and serve as borderline lineup options.

... **Peterson goes to Houston?** Ahman Green is better than anyone Houston had in its backfield last season, but he has durability questions. So does Peterson, who will begin as the backup and receive enough carries to keep both backs healthy. If Green goes down, though, Peterson will become the man. As the Texans' starter, he would do enough to fill a starting spot for fantasy owners.

... **WR Calvin Johnson goes to Detroit?** Forget about those past first-round receiver flops. Taking Johnson will give Detroit two superstars at wideout, and they'll have a coordinator (Mike Martz) who can keep them both happy. Roy Williams will remain the top target, but Johnson will get enough passes thrown his way to be a solid No. 2 receiver for fantasy owners.

... **Johnson goes to Tampa Bay?** Rookie receivers rarely shine, but Johnson will be an exception. With Tampa, Johnson will become a centerpiece in Jon Gruden's game plans. Johnson will quickly replace Joey Galloway as the Bucs' top receiving threat, but who will throw the passes: Chris Simms or Jeff Garcia? It won't matter. You can put Johnson down for 800-plus yards and eight touchdowns. —Rob Hurtt

Concern about high (and low) blood sugar is new to David Wells, but the high stakes it comes with are not.

Wells is well—and going all out to keep it that way

By Stan McNeal

smcneal@sportingnews.com

Kevin Towers was hanging by the batting cage before a spring training game when David Wells sidled up. "Shoot, dude," Wells told his general manager, "I just got diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes."

Shoot, dude, is right. The Padres had signed the portly lefty to shore up their rotation, and his future—already a question mark because of his age and injury history—had become even more uncertain. Type 2 diabetes, considered less serious than insulin-dependent Type 1, typically is not a debilitating illness as long as one follows the proper program. This program means little fast food and no fast living. This program means exercise and rest. This program means a healthy lifestyle.

For Wells, this program has meant a major change in the way he lives. Wells has been one of the game's best starting pitchers over the past 20 years, but he is better known for his big belly, beer drinking and brawling. Wells is a guy who has bragged about pitching a perfect game with a hangover, so for him, cutting out all-nighters would seem about as likely as a trip to Vegas without gambling.

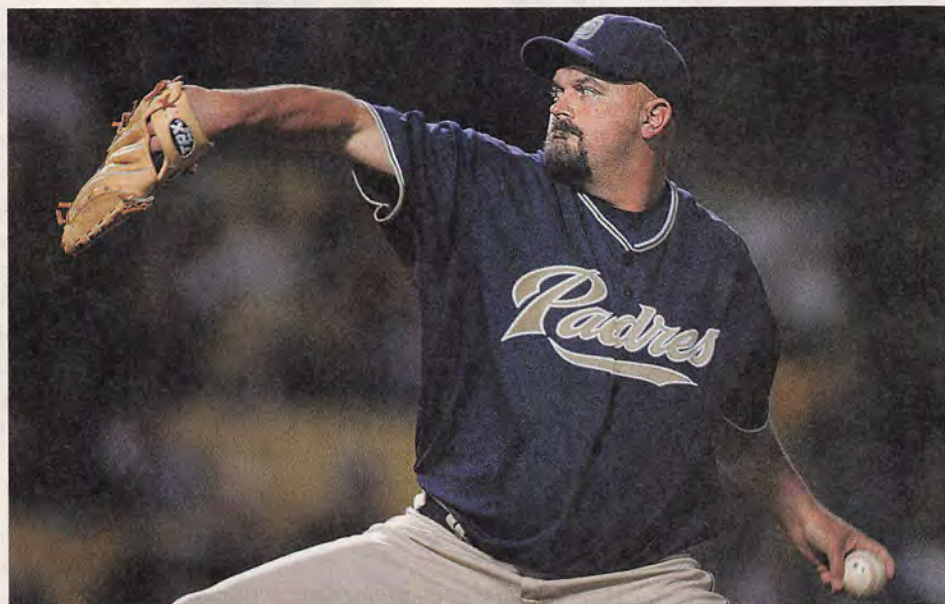
Well, close the casinos. Wells is meeting the challenge. He admits to an occasional glass of wine and jumping off his diet now and then, but diabetes has not derailed him. Subsisting

largely on chicken and vegetables, Wells says he has lost 12 pounds since the early-March diagnosis and feels better than he has in years. Not that he ever has considered his weight much of an issue. "I've won 20 games at 270, and I've won 19 at 220, so as long as I'm somewhere in between, I can get guys out," Wells says.

Wells may have spent much of his 20-plus years in the majors acting like an overgrown kid, but he grasps the danger of diabetes. He saw his

mother die at 58 from diabetes. He realizes his fondness for burgers and booze contributed to his diagnosis. He does not want to risk heart trouble or have to become insulin-dependent, which are possibilities if he can't control his blood-sugar levels through lifestyle changes. Wells, 44, also wants to pitch until "they drag the jersey off me" and knows his chances of doing that improve if he takes care of himself.

In his starts this season, Wells has been up and down. He was pummeled by the Dodgers so badly that a scout in attendance thought Wells might be done. His next time out, against the Diamondbacks, Wells was so effective—seven innings, three hits, two runs—that same scout rewrote his report. Wells' G.M. also was impressed. "That was as good as he's pitched as a Padre, even when he was here in '04," Towers says. (It also was classic Boomer because he was ejected from the dugout in the 12th inning, then accused the umpire involved of rubbing his own tummy to imply Wells was fat.)



With reduced weight and a much-altered lifestyle, Wells is dominating diabetes.



KATHY WILLIAMS / AP

A-Rod bashing has new meaning these days

Alex Rodriguez is wowing people from coast to coast—even his colleagues. Mariners phenom Felix Hernandez was sitting in the visitors' clubhouse at Angel Stadium watching the Yankees-Red Sox game on television as teammates were emerging from a hitters meeting.

Richie Sexson glanced up, saw the score had changed and looked at Hernandez. "No way," Sexson said as Hernandez confirmed Rodriguez had blasted home run No. 2 for the game and No. 12 for the season.

As topics go, Rodriguez has been as hot as his hitting.

Adrian Beltre came next. "Alex!" he yelled, almost giddily, as he took a front-row seat.

Indeed, Rodriguez has everyone's attention. His 31 RBIs going into the week are 12 more than any other major leaguer. His on-base plus slugging percentage is an out-of-this-world 1.464, and—how about this, Yankees fans—he has five homers in his eight at-bats with runners in scoring position and two out.

Maybe he cleared his head with that come-clean-about-Jeter interview. Maybe his leaner look and offseason work are paying off. Maybe that early-season walkoff grand slam boosted his confidence. Maybe he's just the best player on the planet.

Even if Wells continues to make healthy choices, diabetes is going to make pitching more difficult. Diabetics do best when they follow a daily routine—checking their blood at the same times each day, eating at the same times, resting at the same times—and that's virtually impossible on a major leaguer's schedule. Pitching in summer humidity will add another challenge because blood-sugar levels can spike during times of heavy perspiration.

But don't worry too much about Wells. Forget his appearance—he is a special athlete. "His delivery is probably less flawed than anyone's in baseball," says a scout who has watched Wells his entire career. "A lot is made about his drinking and off-the-field stuff, but this is a guy who always shows up, especially when the stakes are high. There's something to be said for the guy who takes it up a notch in the big game."

These days, the big game of life is dealing Wells a new challenge. I'm not betting against him. **SN**



speedreads

Word association time:

Mark Buehrle's no-hitter: *Cha-ching.*

Bobby Cox's contract extension: *Lifer.*

Barry Zito's two scoreless starts: *Whew.*

Anyone who thinks Vladimir Guerrero has slipped a notch needs to think again. In his first three at-bats after sitting out two games with a bruised right wrist, he doubled, singled and homered—and he is hitting .396. No one swings harder and squares the ball better than the Angels' right fielder.

Memo to editors: Time to step up the planning for covering 756.

If Buehrle hadn't given up that walk, maybe his mates would have doused him in Cristal instead of beer.

BLOG ALERT

'Those poor Royals. It looks like they're settling in for another long season.'

Stan McNeal doesn't think K.C.'s young studs are going to change the team's fortunes just yet. Tell him what you think at sportingnews.com.

The weather finally is warming, and not coincidentally, so are the bats. But offensive production still is down compared with last year. After the first three weeks of 2006, four teams were hitting under .250; this season, 14 are. Last year, 12 teams had ERAs higher than 5.00 after three weeks; this season, only three do. ➤ We will find out in the next week whether caution used by Mariners RHP **Felix Hernandez** saved his season. Hernandez took himself out of a game against the Twins after throwing 24 pitches—a start in which he allowed two singles and a walk and threw a wild pitch—because of elbow tightness. The Mariners later said an MRI showed no ligament damage. If Hernandez had continued pitching, he almost certainly would have suffered greater injury. That vacuum effect you may feel the next time he starts will be from the Seattle community holding its collective breath. ➤ Credit the strong start by Cubs RHP **Jason Marquis** to improved command and an upgrade in his fastball, which he is throwing consistently in the low 90s. ➤ At least one National League G.M., in noting how much the Cardinals miss RHP **Chris Carpenter**—"He's the heart and soul of that team"—believes the Brewers are the team to beat in the N.L. Central. ➤ With hard-throwing RHP **Derrick Turnbow** pitching as he did two years ago and RHP **Francisco Cordero** perfect in his first six save opportunities, the Brewers have had the best late-innings relief in the division. ➤ It took Yankees manager **Joe Torre** less than three weeks to break his vow not to use RHP **Mariano Rivera** in the eighth inning—and the move did not pay off. Rivera blew his second save chance by

INSIDE DISH

giving up three straight hits in a loss to the Red Sox. Rivera's arm strength may not be 100 percent yet because his cut fastball hasn't reached 90 mph at times. Neither Rivera nor Mariners RHP **J.J. Putz** had a save when the week began; Putz had yet to get his first opportunity. ➤ By misplaying four fly balls in a week and hitting .143 at Petco Park, Gold Glove CF **Mike Cameron** didn't help his case in negotiations to extend his contract with the Padres. ➤ The Virginia Tech cap

worn by Angels LHP **Joe Saunders** as a tribute to the victims in last week's tragedy was one he wore in the last of his three years pitching for the Hokies. Saunders, the only VT alum in the majors, beat the Mariners with six shutout innings despite allowing at least one hit in each inning. "Definitely, there was somebody upstairs looking out for me tonight," Saunders says. The next day, despite being 2-0 with a 1.96 ERA, Saunders was sent to the minors when the Angels activated RHP **Bartolo Colon**.



Diamondbacks RHP **Brandon Webb**, the 2006 N.L. Cy Young award winner, is getting better. The sinkerball specialist dominated the Padres last week by using a changeup, and he had one scout in attendance saying it was the best he had seen Webb throw. Webb struck out a career-best 13, including six in a row.

PAUL CONNORS / AP

Fantasy Source

The first month is the toughest

By Chris Bahr

cbahr@sportingnews.com

Let me guess—you're already a slave to your fantasy baseball teams. Warning signs: checking your league standings more than once per day (this includes live scoring updates during games), cooking huge dinners in hopes that your wife will doze off early (so you can check live scoring more often) and spending your lunch hour scanning the best available middle infielders in your Rotisserie league.

Relax. As they say, it's a marathon, not a sprint. There's no reason to burn out now and ruin the next five months of enjoyment. And while you're at it, try to avoid making a few other common early-season mistakes.

Sitting on your waiver spot. Many times, having the top waiver priority is more of a curse than a blessing. You're afraid to waste it on a marginal pickup because you fear the next big thing will come along the next week and be out of your grasp. But by waiting for something that might never happen, you're missing out on plenty of talent. Now is the time to jump on that sleeper closer or that resurgent outfield bat.

Overreacting about good/bad starts. A poor April is no reason to give up on a proven veteran, but you'd be amazed how many owners hit the panic button. Sure,

Albert Pujols has fallen short of expectations in the first few weeks, but labeling him as the all-time bust among

No. 1 overall picks is ridiculous. Likewise, you shouldn't get too pumped up when a no-name hitter suddenly looks like Babe Ruth. If you need a dose of reality, check Chris Shelton's stats from April 2006.

Making multiple trades. I'm always amazed when I read e-mails about eight-player deals in April or when I'm asked to analyze the trades an owner has already made. Yes, that's plural. You spent all offseason researching these players, so why are you willing to ship them off after less than a month? It's fine to make a trade to cover for an injury or to boost a statistical category that's going to be trouble, but don't trade just to trade.

BLOG ALERT

'My bet is Mariano Rivera finishes with 35 to 40 saves, posts his usual ERA and WHIP numbers and makes you forget all about his slow start.'

Chris Bahr says no to fantasy owners who are thinking of trading away Mo. Pitch your ideas at sportingnews.com.



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

Pujols' six years of excellence count more than one bad month.

FANTASY DISH

Worried about your lefthanded starter facing the Cardinals? Don't be. The Cardinals have hit just .204 against lefthanders this season, which ties them for 26th in the majors. Even fringe lefthanders deserve starting consideration against St. Louis. ➤

The Royals are striking out with startling regularity, and OF **Mark Teahen**, 3B **Alex Gordon** and 1B **Ryan Shealy** have been the biggest culprits. Don't write any of them off, even in a mixed league, though. They have too much talent not to turn things around.

➤ Pirates SPs **Zach Duke** and **Ian Snell** were better-known prospects, but lefthander **Tom Gorzelanny** is proving his worth, too. Gorzelanny has walked only four in 20.1 innings and hasn't given up a homer. ➤

SS **Jimmy Rollins** is a notorious slow starter, but his hot start this season could mean he is ready to build on the career year he had in 2006. Don't worry about his lagging steals total; he has had a number of extra-base hits so far. ➤ With **Reed Johnson** expected out until July because of back surgery, Blue Jays OF **Adam Lind** will get plenty of at-bats. He hit well at every stop in the minors, and he showed during a September call-up last year that he can deliver. —Roger Kuznia



ALBERT DICKSON / SN



BEN MARGOT / AP

A.L. EAST

BALTIMORE ORIOLES

With the return of LF **Jay Payton** (hamstring), **Jay Gibbons** will be the primary DH and **Kevin Millar** will split time between DH and first. Payton adds speed to the bottom of the order. ... With Payton back, CF **Corey Patterson** will play less against lefthanders. For those matchups, the team can put Payton in center and use Gibbons or Millar in left. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** Gibbons will get most of the time at DH upon Payton's return, but Millar could win the job if he stays hot. Gibbons is supposed to be a lefty power source but has hit no home runs. —*Spencer Fordin*

BOSTON RED SOX

LHP **Hideki Okajima**, 31, is making a smooth transition to the big leagues after playing 12 pro seasons in Japan. His ability to retire righthanded batters with his changeup enables him to be more than a specialist. Okajima allowed just two hits in his first 8½ innings. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** CF **Coco Crisp**'s down season in 2006 was caused in part by a finger injury, but now he's healthy and still struggling. Crisp isn't getting on base regularly and is striking out too much. The pressure is on him to produce because backup **Wily Mo Pena** is a powerful alternative. —*Ian Browne*



Pettitte

JOHN DUNN FOR SN

NEW YORK YANKEES

LHP **Andy Pettitte** is helping on the mound—he has a 1.85 ERA—and in the clubhouse. He has become a mentor to young players, particularly LHP **Chase Wright**, and has reached out to oft-injured RHP **Carl Pavano**. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** Though the team doesn't expect lots of offense from 1B **Doug Mientkiewicz**, a slick fielder, it is growing impatient with his hitting. He already has had an 0-for-24 stretch and has been removed from the lineup against some righthanders in favor of **Josh Phelps**, who was expected to start mostly against lefthanders. —*Bryan Hoch*

TAMPA BAY DEVIL RAYS

The bullpen is struggling, and RHP **Ruddy Lugo** in particular is off to a slow start—entering the week, he had allowed 15 baserunners and eight runs in three innings. He could be headed to Class AAA Durham for a tuneup. There are several candidates to replace Lugo: LHP **Jeff Ridgeway** and RHPs **Seth McClung** and **Tim Corcoran** all are pitching well at Class AAA. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** OF/DH **Jonny Gomes** has not been playing regularly, so he could be sent to the minors when 1B/DH **Greg Norton** (knee) returns. Gomes is 2-for-13 for the season. —*Bill Chastain*

TORONTO BLUE JAYS

In their first eight games without 3B **Troy Glaus** (hamstring/foot), the Jays scored more than four runs just once. **Jason Smith** and **John McDonald** have been platooning at third. Though they are hitting .353 as Glaus' replacements, they have combined to score only two runs and have driven in two. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** RHP **Tomo Ohka** had a 7.02 ERA after three starts and had as many home runs allowed (6) as strikeouts. If his troubles continue, the Blue Jays could turn to RHPs **Victor Zambrano** and **Casey Janssen**, relievers with starting experience. —*Jordan Bastian*

A.L. CENTRAL

CHICAGO WHITE SOX

It is clear LHP **Mark Buehrle**, who threw a no-hitter last week, has better stuff than he did last year. His velocity is in the low 90s; he was throwing in the mid-80s in 2006. Getting back in the 90s creates a bigger distinction between his fastball and changeup. Buehrle also has better movement on his cutter. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** Manager **Ozzie Guillen** says OF **Brian Anderson**'s spot on the team is safe, but it's easy to see how a numbers crunch could land him in the minors once LF **Scott Podsednik** is healthy. Anderson plays great defense but needs to produce at the plate. —*Scott Merkin*



Anderson

JAY DROWNS / SN

CLEVELAND INDIANS

The club is pleased with the improvement in RHP **Fernando Cabrera**'s slider. Cabrera uses the slider to complement his high-90s fastball. Some in the organization believe he can develop into a late-inning reliever; right now, he pitches in the middle innings. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** **Andy Marte** earned the third base job largely because of his defense in 2006, but he made four errors in his first 12 games and at least two other playable balls got past him. The club might give 1B/OF **Casey Blake** some starts at third if Marte continues to struggle. —*Anthony Castrovine*

DETROIT TIGERS

Though the club won in each of LHP **Mike Maroth**'s first three starts, he has been inconsistent with his pitches—especially his changeup, which he has been leaving over the plate. Maroth had elbow surgery last season and missed three months. His arm feels good; he needs reps to get on track. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** RHP **Chad Durbin** is struggling as the No. 5 starter—he says he needs to make better pitches on two-strike counts. Because of Durbin's ineffectiveness, many are wondering whether LHP **Andrew Miller**, a top prospect, will be ready for the majors this year. —*Jason Beck*

KANSAS CITY ROYALS

Manager **Buddy Bell** says rookie **Alex Gordon** is the guy at third base, period. Gordon has struggled on offense, but the team believes he'll come around. He's taking extra batting practice and studying video to improve at the plate. Gordon played shortstop during a game last week but only because the Royals were shorthanded in the infield. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** If LHP **Odalis Perez** continues to struggle, it will be hard to keep him in the rotation when RHP **Scott Elarton** (shoulder) and RHP **Luke Hudson** (shoulder) return. Perez was 1-2 with an 8.64 ERA in his first four starts. —*Jim Molony*

MINNESOTA TWINS

Sidearming RHP **Pat Neshek** worked on a changeup this spring to use against lefthanders, but he hasn't refined it enough to throw it in games. Left-handed hitters batted 104 points higher than righthanders (.244 to .140) against Neshek last season. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** OF/DH **Jason Kubel**, who was being groomed for everyday duty, hasn't been the regular left fielder with **Rondell White** (calf) on the D.L. Kubel is splitting time with **Jason Tyner**, who provides speed and athleticism, and **Josh Rabe**, a righthanded alternative to lefties Kubel and Tyner. —*Kelly Thesier*

THE CLOSER Todd Jones

Baseball is watching *What Not to Wear*

Baseball has made some positive changes over the past 15 years, from implementing drug testing to improving marketing and merchandising. Heck, we even have MLB-issued ID cards to get us into the ballparks now.

But not all of the changes have been so wise. Take the uniform policy on uniforms. There are folks who sit in MLB's offices and monitor what players are wearing—similar to what the No Fun League does with football players. We call the baseball folks the uniform police—when we're being polite.

A bunch of guys had the flags of their home countries on their shoes, hats, bats, etc. Now, no more flags. Also, no more crosses of faith or initials of friends or loved ones on hats. MLB wants uniformity.

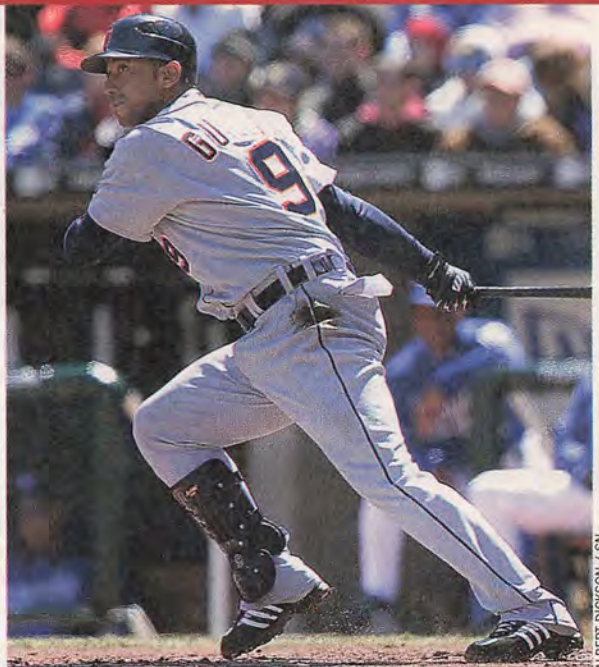
The color scheme of players' shoes—at least 51 percent of the shoes have to be the team's main color—and the length of their pants are big deals, too. I realize some players have gotten creative and blurred the line between uniforms and pajamas, but come on.

In last year's playoffs, I got a nice letter from

the fashion police about my lucky undershirt. Seems it was cool when I was playing on lousy teams to wear whatever T-shirt I thought was lucky, but now I'm having to wear an MLB-authorized lucky T-shirt. I put the letter in one of those round files we all keep by our desks. Then a funny thing happened in spring training: I was fined \$1,000 and told to find an MLB-sanctioned lucky T-shirt or I would be fined \$5,000. The next time after that, I would be suspended.

And get this: When Joel Zumaya got new tattoos, he didn't check with MLB on the color schemes, so he has been told to sever his arms or wear long sleeves when he pitches. Perhaps MLB could cut a deal with an ink company and come up with authentic tats for all the guys.

The topper came last week when MLB sent Carlos Guillen a friendly reminder to tuck in the pockets where he keeps his batting gloves—or



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

Corporate is checking out your backside, Carlos.

else he, too, will be fined and possibly suspended.

After several minutes of stunned silence, you wonder how all this became important.

Got a question only a player can answer? Ask the one major leaguer who writes a weekly column in a national sports magazine. E-mail Tigers reliever Todd Jones at asktodd@sportingnews.com, then look for his answer at sportingnews.com.

A.L. WEST

MLB.com 

LOS ANGELES ANGELS

C **Mike Napoli** has power to center and right-center, yet he tries too hard to pull the ball and hit home runs. He struck out 12 times in his first 36 at-bats. ... With RHPs **Bartolo Colon**, **Jered Weaver** and **Kelvin Escobar** off the D.L., the rotation is at full strength for the first time this season.

ON THE HOT SEAT: DH **Shea Hillenbrand**, who was signed to fill in for OF/DH **Juan Rivera** (broken leg), was removed from the fifth spot in the order after a slow start. The club will use 1B/3B **Kendry Morales** to push Hillenbrand until Rivera returns around midseason. —*Lyle Spencer*

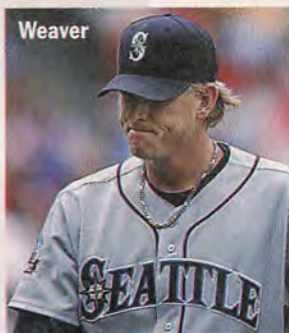
OAKLAND ATHLETICS

G.M. **Billy Beane** hardly is a fan of the stolen base, but he has told manager **Bob Geren** to handle games however he sees fit. The A's stole nine bases in their first 17 games; last season, under **Ken Macha**, they stole three in all of April.

ON THE HOT SEAT: When RHP **Esteban Loaiza** returns, it appears LHP **Joe Kennedy** will be the odd man out in the rotation. RHP **Chad Gaudin** has been a revelation as a starter, and when the team decided to skip a starter's turn after two days off in a five-day span, it bypassed Kennedy and left Gaudin in the mix. —*Mychal Urban*

SEATTLE MARINERS

The team is facing a stern test without ace RHP **Felix Hernandez** (elbow), who might be out until early May. RHP **Cha Seung Baek** has replaced Hernandez. The team doesn't want to rush RHP **Brandon Morrow**, its 2006 top pick, into the rotation. He'll stay in the bullpen, where he's still searching for his groove. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** Too many of RHP **Jeff Weaver**'s pitches have been right down the middle, and hitters have been clobbering them. Though the team would prefer to wait before it makes Morrow a starter, it might be wise to get him ready. —*Jim Street*



MARK AVERY / AP

TEXAS RANGERS

RHP **Robinson Tejeda** is making progress with his breaking ball and changeup. Having something to fall back on when he isn't hitting 97 mph is the key to his development. ... RHP **Eric Gagne**'s fastball was reaching 93 to 94 mph before he strained his right hip last weekend.

ON THE HOT SEAT: OF **Brad Wilkerson** will need to be more productive or he'll find himself out of the lineup a lot—and not just when his sore left knee needs rest. **Sammy Sosa** might provide better protection for 1B **Mark Teixeira**, and **Nelson Cruz** also needs to play frequently. —*T.R. Sullivan*



ATLANTA BRAVES

The club doesn't have a proven lefthanded reliever who can fill **Mike Gonzalez's** setup role when his elbow forces him out of action as it did last week. With **Macay McBride** in the minors fixing his mechanics, journeyman **Steve Colyer** has replaced Gonzalez. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** Because LF **Ryan Langerhans** is struggling at the plate, the Braves could replace him in the lineup with hot-hitting **Matt Diaz**. Langerhans is superior on defense, but Diaz's hitting has forced manager **Bobby Cox** to at least think about sitting Langerhans. —Mark Bowman

N.L. EAST

FLORIDA MARLINS

LF **Josh Willingham** frequently was lifted in late innings for defensive purposes last year, but new manager **Fredri Gonzalez** doesn't plan to do that this season. ... Unless RHP **Ricky Nolasco** is needed to fill a spot in the rotation, he will become an option at closer as the season progresses. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** RF **Jeremy Hermida** (right knee), who has struggled with injuries since last season, will have to show he is healthy to return. With **Cody Ross** and **Joe Borchard** available as alternatives, Hermida will have to play his way back into the lineup. —Joe Frisaro

NEW YORK METS

With RF **Shawn Green** hitting better than expected—.311 in his first 61 at-bats—manager **Willie Randolph** has had trouble finding at-bats for No. 4 OF **Endy Chavez**. That will change in the heat of summer, when it will be more critical for Green, **Moises Alou** and **Carlos Beltran** to get rest. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** RHP **Aaron Sele**, 36, must continue to pitch well because the club has other options for his long-relief job. Possible replacements include LHP **Jason Vargas** and RHP **Jorge Sosa**, though neither is the veteran the team would prefer for the role. —Marty Noble

PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES

RHP **Brett Myers**, the team's opening day starter, was shifted to a setup role—a move that suggests the team is desperate. Myers also will get some save chances when RHP **Tom Gordon** isn't available. RHP **Jon Lieber** has moved back to the rotation. As a reliever, he didn't adjust well to not knowing when he would pitch. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** 3B **Wes Helms'** defense is suspect, so he's going to have to hit better to keep his spot. Though he's hitting for average, he's not driving the ball. Manager **Charlie Manuel** could opt for **Abraham Nunez**, a superior defender. —Ken Mandel

WASHINGTON NATIONALS

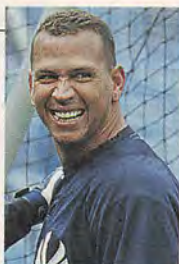
The team is overloaded with lefthanded hitters and hopes OF **Michael Restovich** can provide a boost from the right side. He didn't make the opening day roster after trying too hard to hit homers during spring training. Restovich plans to try for base hits this time around. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** SS **Cristian Guzman** struggled in 2005, missed 2006 and now is on the D.L. again with a hamstring injury. The double-play combination of SS **Felipe Lopez** and 2B **Ronnie Belliard** has worked out well, which could put Guzman out of a job. —Bill Ladson

■ Few A.L. teams are as aggressive on the bases as L.A. and Tampa Bay. The D-Rays, however, have been much more effective getting runners past third base—that is, when they don't have two guys there simultaneously (see: Carl Crawford, Ben Zobrist).



■ The Braves are disappointed about losing **Mike Hampton** (again) to an elbow injury, but consider the Rockies' plight: Colorado still is responsible for a sizable chunk of Hampton's remaining salary. In his two-year Rockies career, Hampton had as many RBIs (21) as wins.

■ Finally! **Alex Rodriguez** is thrilled to get away from the cheers, the forgiving atmosphere and the open-arms mentality and go someplace where he can hear a few boos again.



Dream week

April 26-May 2

THURSDAY, APRIL 26

Devil Rays at Angels

FRIDAY, APRIL 27

Braves at Rockies

SATURDAY, APRIL 28

Royals at Mariners

SUNDAY, APRIL 29

Marlins at Phillies

MONDAY, APRIL 30

Orioles at Tigers

TUESDAY, MAY 1

Yankees at Rangers

WEDNESDAY, MAY 2

Reds at Astros

■ **Gil Meche** returns to Safeco Field, where a packed house will be waiting to greet him with boos and insults. OK, that's giving Meche, who would go unrecognized if he walked through downtown Seattle in his full uniform while carrying a huge replica check for \$55 million, a little too much credit. The M's lost an ace when King Felix's elbow acted up, not when Meche bolted.



■ **Jorge Julio** wasted no time imploding, which leaves the Marlins with six potential closer candidates—enough for Philadelphia setup man Antonio Alfonseca to list on one hand.

■ The defending A.L. champs could learn a lot from the Orioles. Earlier this season, Baltimore committed three errors on the same play but still won the game. In the 2006 World Series, Detroit pitchers committed five errors and threw away the championship.

■ The Astros must show Roger Clemens he is desperately needed—and convince him they can get to the World Series. They won't, however, tell the well-rested Rocket that they need him to be their No. 2, 4 and 5 starters—and their No. 3 if Jason Jennings misses more time. —Chris Bahr

HE SAID IT

"Maybe everybody is too comfortable around here. Maybe we're digging ourselves a little too much with the world championship (stuff) going on every minute of the day. It's definitely noticeable."

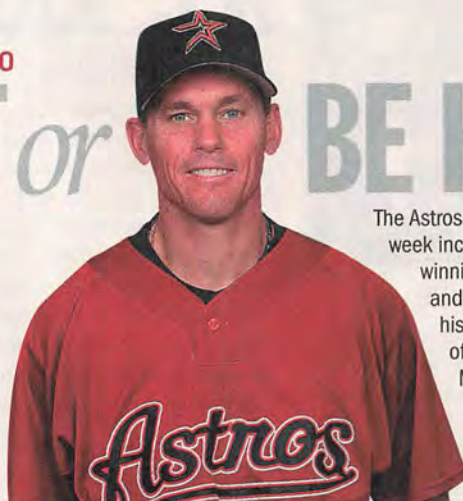
—Cardinals center fielder Jim Edmonds on why his team has started slowly this season



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

CRAIG BIGGIO

HIT or BE HIT



The Astros second baseman's week included a game-winning grand slam and, more important historically, his first HBP of 2007, courtesy of Marlins reliever Jorge Julio. Biggio is five away from breaking the career record.

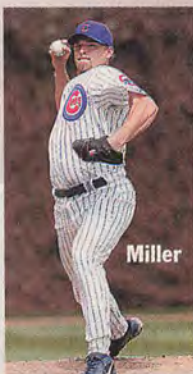
2007 TOTALS



N.L. CENTRAL

CHICAGO CUBS

To reduce the stress on the legs of **Alfonso Soriano**, who missed a week with a hamstring strain, the club temporarily will move him from center to left. Manager **Lou Piniella** says the center fielder will be whoever hits best among **Jacque Jones**, **Felix Pie** and **Matt Murton**. Look for Soriano to end up back in center eventually. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** RHP **Wade Miller**, the No. 5 starter, has struggled with his location, has been hit hard and hasn't gone deep in games. Class AAA RHP **Angel Guzman**, who has a 97-mph fastball and a nasty curve, is one option to replace Miller. —Carrie Muskat



JAY DROWNS / SN

MILWAUKEE BREWERS

CF **Bill Hall**, a converted infielder, is trying to break the habit of flipping the ball from his glove to this throwing hand. With the bigger glove he uses in the outfield, Hall has bobbled balls several times—and he was charged with two errors last week. It's one of a number of little things he's working on. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** RHP **Greg Aquino**, who won the last bullpen spot over RHPs **Jose Capellan** and **Chris Spurling** in the spring, was replaced by Spurling last week. Aquino is a power pitcher who's tough to hit when he throws strikes, but he was leaving too many sliders up in the zone. —Adam McCalvy

CINCINNATI REDS

IF/OF **Ryan Freel** has moved back to a utility role because of OF **Josh Hamilton**'s hot start. Freel will continue to play a lot, mainly at second and third base. ... **Norris Hopper**, activated from the D.L. last week, can play all the outfield spots and second base. His speed makes him a good pinch-hitting and pinch-running option. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** Hamilton's rise may put the most heat on **Edwin Encarnacion**, who hasn't been hitting well. Encarnacion has gotten better on defense, but Freel also can handle himself at third base and offers a spark hitting leadoff. —Mark Sheldon

PITTSBURGH PIRATES

RHP **Shawn Chacon**, a former starter, has taken to his new role working out of the bullpen. In his first 13 innings, Chacon allowed just three earned runs and struck out 11. He credits pitching coach **Jim Colborn** for helping him to fine-tune his mechanics. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** Onetime starter **Jose Castillo** now is backing up 2B **Freddy Sanchez** and 3B **Jose Bautista**. And Castillo is in danger of losing his utility job after a 2-for-21 start in which he didn't walk once. The Pirates might try to get Castillo back on track by playing him every day in the minors. —Jim Molony

HOUSTON ASTROS

RHP **Brad Lidge** no longer is the regular closer, but he could get some ninth-inning work if RHP **Dan Wheeler** or RHP **Chad Qualls** is used earlier in games. Manager **Phil Garner** says he won't hesitate to use Lidge. ... RHP **Brandon Backe** (elbow) wasn't expected to pitch again until 2008 but could return shortly after the All-Star break. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** 2B **Craig Biggio** will play regularly until he reaches 3,000 hits; after that, he won't be guaranteed anything if his average doesn't improve. **Mark Loretta** would play more, and Biggio could drop in the order, from first to sixth. —Alyson Footer

ST. LOUIS CARDINALS

OF **Chris Duncan** is playing more against lefthanders and is holding up well against them. He no longer is in a strict platoon. ... SS **David Eckstein** is hitting too many balls in the air. When he is on his game, he hits lots of hard grounders and line drives. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** Backup OF **Skip Schumaker** is a solid defensive player, but he needs to hit better if he wants to play more—and keep his roster spot. **Juan Encarnacion** (wrist) is working his way back, and the team will send down an outfielder to make room for him when he's healthy. —Matthew Leach



STUMBLERS C A.J. Pierzynski, White Sox ➤ 1B Kevin Millar, Orioles ➤ 2B Chris Burke, Astros ➤ 3B Eric Chavez, A's ➤ SS Juan Uribe, White Sox ➤

Things you need to know about ... Mariners closer J.J. Putz

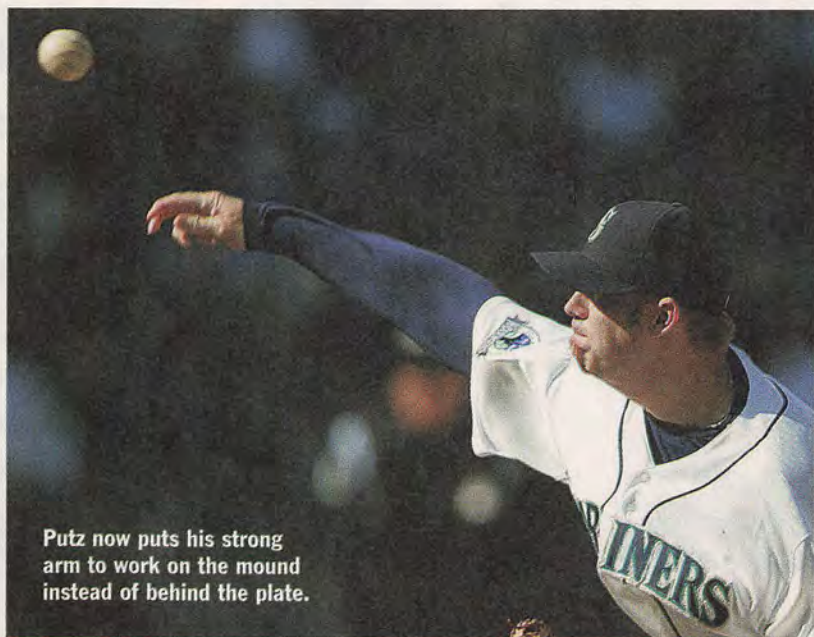
Listed at 6-5, 250 and with hands the size of watermelons, Putz is huge. He emerged as a top closer last season with 36 saves and 104 strikeouts in 78⅓ innings. The righthander began the week still looking for his first save opportunity of 2007.

I've always thrown hard. I was a catcher at a summer league tournament between my sophomore and junior years of high school, and the coach said they needed someone to pitch. I said I'd try, and I went out there and was throwing in the 90s right away.

I'm intense out there because I get caught up in the moment. If you look at any number of closers, they have that intense emotion—except for maybe Mariano, but he wasn't always like that. I can remember him being a fist-pumper, too. When you're getting the last out of a 1-run game, it's a release of the emotion when you let that big roar out.

I stick to the same routine every game, no matter what the score is. For the first 4½ to five innings, I'm in the clubhouse riding the bike and getting worked on. Then I go out to the bullpen. The hardest part of being in the last role is the ups and downs of the game. The game can change in two seconds.

Growing up in Michigan, I've always rooted for the Tigers and still do except when we're playing them. My all-time favorite player is Lance Parrish. I grew up as a catcher and had that Lance Parrish black mitt with the orange in the middle.



Putz now puts his strong arm to work on the mound instead of behind the plate.

ELAINE THOMPSON / AP

We have one of the best team planes in baseball. It has satellite television with a monitor for nearly every guy. We've got the Extra Innings package, everything. There's two seats per side, they're like La-Z-Boy recliners. There's food available all of the time and movies always playing. Those Tampa-to-Seattle trips never are fun, and we lose a lot of off-days to travel, but it would be a lot worse if we flew on regular planes. —Stan McNeal

N.L. WEST

ARIZONA DIAMONDBACKS

1B **Conor Jackson**'s slump is tied to his approach at the plate. He has been trying to guide the ball rather than attack it as he did when he was hot in spring training and during the first week of the season.

ON THE HOT SEAT: The team may use RHP **Tony Pena** instead of RHP **Brandon Medders** in key situations after Medders allowed five homers in his first 9⅓ innings. He must keep the ball low; when his fastball is high, hitters pounce on it. —Steve Gilbert

COLORADO ROCKIES

Rookie C **Chris Iannetta** is receiving high marks for his defense, especially his throwing accuracy, but his struggles at the plate—he was hitting .129 entering the week—will give **Yorvit Torrealba** more playing time. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** RHP **LaTroy Hawkins** lost his setup job to RHP **Manny Corpas** after leaving too many pitches up in key situations. The team needs Hawkins to find his form to add depth to the bullpen and provide insurance for Corpas. —Thomas Harding



LOS ANGELES DODGERS

LHP **Mark Hendrickson** started last week in place of RHP **Jason Schmidt** (shoulder), who was put on the disabled list. Hendrickson, who had been working out of the bullpen, had a 1.62 ERA and 13 strikeouts in his first 16⅔ innings.

ON THE HOT SEAT: **Wilson Betemit** hasn't done much on offense and already would've been replaced at third base if the team had another option. The Dodgers are reluctant to move 1B **Nomar Garciaparra** to third because they fear his body wouldn't hold up. —Ken Gurnick

SAN DIEGO PADRES

The team might carry three catchers when **Josh Bard** returns. **Pete Laforest**, who was 5-for-11 after he was recalled, would be a good bench guy.... RHP **Clay Hensley** hasn't been keeping the ball down. Pitching coach **Darren Balsley** is tinkering with Hensley's mechanics. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** Rookie 3B **Kevin Kouzmanoff** has been better than expected on defense, but he was acquired for his bat. If he doesn't start hitting, **Russell Branyan** could play more. —Corey Brock

SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS

2B **Ray Durham**'s range in the field is better than it had been in years. He worked this offseason to strengthen his legs and end a recent string of injuries; the exercises also have improved his lateral movement. **ON THE HOT SEAT:** **Todd Linden** is challenging RF **Randy Winn** for playing time. Winn has shown little power at the plate, so he'll need to play solid defense, spray the ball to all fields and bunt well to remain an everyday player. —Chris Haft



Robots would be wonderful, but the NHL is aiming for the next best thing: referees who can be programmed for consistency.

It's an official explanation that makes sense

By Kara Yorio

kyorio@sportingnews.com

While watching officials attempt to keep the Predators and Sharks from mauling each other in Game 2 of their first-round series, I had a thought. Wouldn't it be better if these Game 2 officials were the same ones who had called Game 1? Wouldn't that make them better able to keep the series under control and prevent bad blood from causing violence to escalate? And shouldn't the same crew stay on until the series ends?

It seems so obvious. The league couldn't be overlooking an idea that makes so much sense, could it? Who better to ask than the NHL's director of officiating, Stephen Walkom?

The lengthy conversation I had with Walkom was curious by NHL exec standards because he wasn't defensive, dismissive or condescending. He might not have converted me on all officiating issues, but he made good arguments. I certainly can't agree with every call I've seen these playoffs—or some things I haven't seen called—but I've tabled my idea of keeping the four-man crews together from the beginning of a series to its end. Walkom agrees it would work great—theoretically. But as a former referee, he

says in practicality, it's much different.

"From freshness and performance level, we always found it easier if we moved from series to series," says Walkom, who admits it's difficult to explain why. "(Officials are) sharper picking up and going to the next city. They're refreshed and ready to go."

As for knowing the tone of past games and what nastiness exists between the two teams, Walkom says each series has a manager who briefs the incoming officials on its history—to a point. There apparently is a fine line between knowing enough and knowing too much.

"We want them to be aware of what has happened previously but react to what is happening in that game," Walkom says.

OK. But what about consistency? When the

referees are switching up every game, doesn't that mean every game of the series is called differently? Isn't a hold in the eye of the beholder?

"That's the way it used to be in the old culture," says Walkom, who was a part of that world as an NHL referee from 1990 through 2004. "In the old culture, different referees called the game different ways."

But that's not what the league wants anymore. They want a standard to be followed rigidly. A hook is a hook. A hold is a hold. A referee is a robot—or at least is the same as every other referee and makes every call based on the league standard.

A consistent set of rules is great, but does it mean taking the "feel of the game" element out of officiating? And is that best? A penalty may be a penalty, but what about a situation such as when the referee momentarily loses sight of the puck near the goalie? Would a "feel" ref, who might wait to see if the puck still is moving before blowing his whistle, mean the difference in a game or possibly a series?

And what about a series that is teetering on the brink of chaos? Wouldn't it be better to call things a little tighter early so the players get in line and don't turn that inch they're given into a mile?

Not an issue, says Walkom. There is no longer such a thing as the game being called tightly or loosely. It's called by the rules. At least that's the hope. Walkom admits it doesn't always happen—and that's another good reason, he says, for moving officials around.

"What happens if guys go into a game and don't have their very best game?" says Walkom,

BLOG ALERT

**'Question: Who wrote
All Quiet on the Western Front?
Answer: Nobody covering the
playoffs.'**

Keep abreast of all the rough-and-tumble postseason action with Ray Slover's blog at sportingnews.com.

When a new referee crew gets to town, it is apprised of any bad blood between teams during previous games of their playoff series.

who shocked me by admitting the scenario is even a possibility. "Do we want to have the teams with a crew they're not comfortable with?"

In that situation, Walkom says, the crew wouldn't be sharp with the same teams the next game, either. Better for them to pack their bags, clear the slate and see a couple of new teams.

And in another nod to the human element of officiating, Walkom says referees can't help forming relationships with players they see over and over again in a short period of time. That isn't fair to a new team they'd see in the next round.

So much for another brilliant idea of mine, though Walkom conceded that one day it might be the way to get the best out of the officials. Right now, he doesn't think it is. And, at the moment, I can't help but agree.

Now, about some of those calls ...

SN

speedreads



Semin

BOB LEVERONE / SN

The Blues aren't in the playoffs, of course, but they gave their fans reason to look forward to next season by signing defenseman Erik Johnson, the top pick in the 2006 draft.

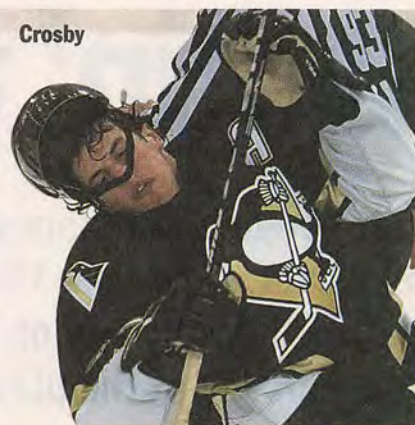
The Caps' Alexander Semin was kicked off the Russian world championship team. Details are sketchy. He reportedly was dismissed for being late to the team's training camp. There may have been a miscommunication. Either way, it seems controversy follows Semin, doesn't it?

With the firing of president and general manager Doug MacLean, the Blue Jackets will take a step in a new direction. Hopefully, for Columbus fans, that will mean becoming a team with a legitimate playoff chance.

The Predators and Islanders made the biggest, boldest deals of the season by sacrificing some potential future success to try to win immediately. Nashville traded for C **Peter Forsberg**, and New York shocked the league by landing LW **Ryan Smyth**. The Predators wanted Forsberg to turn one of the regular season's best teams into a Cup winner. The Islanders were hoping Smyth could spark a long playoff run. Both teams lost in the first round. So are these deals busts? Were they not worth the risk because there was no reward—at least not the one the organizations wanted? Well, there's another step before the deal can be closed on these deals. Both players are set to become unrestricted free agents July 1. If the Predators re-sign Forsberg and the Islanders re-sign Smyth, the deals will have been successes. If both players turn out to be rentals, the trades will have been failures.

➤ The Thrashers' first playoff appearance in franchise history was a huge disappointment. Although many people expected the rolling Rangers to win the series, only the most die-hard Rangers fans predicted a sweep. The Thrashers figured to put up more of a fight. G.M. **Don Waddell** and coach **Bob Hartley** thought they had the right mix of players but must now re-evaluate the roster and search for more consistent players. The team was streaky all season and went ice-cold at the worst possible time. ➤ The Penguins didn't get swept, but their postseason appearance didn't follow the perfect script for superstar C **Sidney Crosby** (who, it turns out, was playing with a broken left foot). However,

Crosby



GENE J. PUSKAS / AP

this talented young team now has playoff experience and knows how difficult postseason games can be and what the deciding factors are. Many players have said it: *You just don't know until you get there.* Now the Penguins know. ➤ The Ducks head into the second

round with a problem most teams would envy. Both goalies, **Ilya Bryzgalov** (four games) and **J.S. Giguere** (one) played well in the first round. That means Anaheim has a competent backup, but the problem is making the tough

choice on whom to start. Should coach **Randy Carlyle** try to keep both goalies sharp or ride one until he falters? ➤ When G **Martin Brodeur** is off his game—as was the case at times during New Jersey's first-round series—the Devils' confidence is visibly affected, as are the performances of almost all his teammates. But second-year LW **Zach Parise** didn't let anyone else's off games affect his play. He was the team's most consistent force on offense against the Lightning.

INSIDE DISH



JULIE JACOBSON / AP

The Thrashers chose the worst time to hit another low in an up-and-down season.

Talkin' with T-Mac

After five one-and-dones with little help and a balky back, Houston's **TRACY McGRADY** says he finally is healthy and on a team that can do some damage in the playoffs

There may be no player under more scrutiny in the first round of the NBA playoffs than Rockets small forward Tracy McGrady, who is making his sixth postseason appearance in 10 seasons in the league. McGrady has been a terrific playoff performer: He comes into this postseason with averages of 29.8 points, 6.8 rebounds and 5.8 assists, but his springs have routinely been cut short—he has never won a playoff series.

That could change in the coming days. McGrady is, for a change, playing on a team with home-court advantage in the first round, and the Rockets are favored against the Jazz. In the series opener, McGrady scored 22 of his 23 points in the second half as Houston overcame a 9-point half-time deficit. SN's Sean Deveney caught up with McGrady to talk about trophies, magical back spasm cures and why the scouting report on the Jazz really doesn't matter.

SN: I imagine the topic of getting to the second round has come up a lot. Do you get tired of being asked about it?

McGRADY: It really hasn't come up that much. I kind of expected it would, but it's not like people are always asking me about it. I don't really need anyone to tell me that. It's a disappointment that I haven't been out of the first round—trust me.

SN: Most times, it seems like you have gone into the playoffs as a low seed. Those lower seeds don't win a lot in the playoffs.

McGRADY: If you go back and look, you see every time I've been on a team that lost, the

Painful exits

Tracy McGrady was 20 when he lost his first playoff series with the Raptors. For T-Mac, now 27, each defeat has been a little tougher to accept.



2000

Knicks 3, Raptors 0

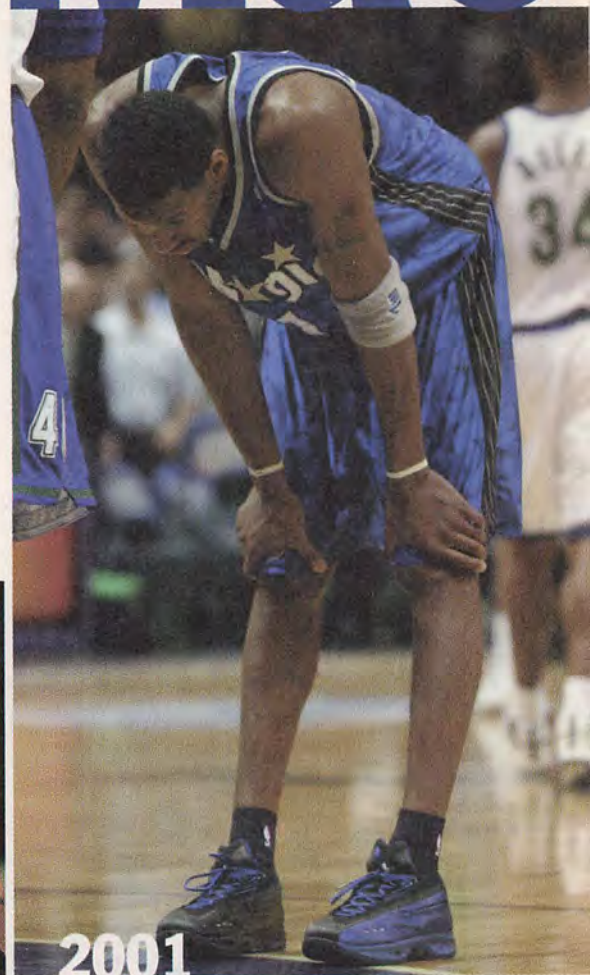
16.7 ppg, 7.0 rpg, 3.7 apg

"We learned from our mistakes, and definitely, hopefully, we'll be back." —Associated Press

other team was just better. No one player on one side is going to beat a better team. People that know basketball, who are real basketball fans, know that in most of those situations you could look at some of those teams and wonder how we even got to the playoffs in the first place.

SN: Those were mostly teams in Orlando. There was one in Toronto and one in Houston.

McGRADY: Not having Grant Hill for all those times with the Magic really took away from those basketball teams. We got Orlando back into the playoffs, at least. They hadn't been there



2001

Bucks 3, Magic 1

33.8 ppg, 6.5 rpg, 8.3 apg

"I'm very disappointed for all of us, but it's not the end of the world. I think we showed a lot of character, and this was a great year for the franchise." —Florida Today

in a long time, and we got them back. I am happy with that.

SN: Do you talk to Grant much? Have you ever looked back with him and talked about what might have been?

McGRADY: I really don't speak to him much. There hasn't been the opportunity to talk with him, and I don't know that now would be the time to wonder what could have been.

SN: The team you have now, it sounds like you have higher expectations than just being in the playoffs.

McGRADY: This is the first time I have been to the playoffs and have been excited about what the team can do. We can accomplish something.

2002

Hornets 3, Magic 1

30.8 ppg, 6.3 rpg, 5.5 apg

"I don't want to be one of those guys who takes six or seven times to get to the next level." —*Chicago Daily Herald*



We have a great core of players. Not just Yao (Ming) and me, but Shane Battier has been a great addition, Luther Head has been a great shooter, Rafer Alston. We can be dangerous because we have that inside-outside combo.

SN: Everybody talks about how the playoffs are different. But for the guys who haven't been through it before, how do you explain to them what's expected?

McGRADY: I voice my opinion. I am going to make sure they know, especially with the team we have. Listen, we cannot be happy about making the playoffs. I have to make them understand that we have to advance here.

SN: How's your health and, specifically, your back? Have you gotten better at managing your back over 82 games?

McGRADY: It's not a matter of that. When I came back in late December, I was fine. In the beginning of the season, I was not healthy. It was hurting, and I was having trouble walking at times. But I went to see this doctor down in Waco, and he completely healed it.

'If you go back and look, you see every time I've been on a team that lost, the other team was just better. No one player on one side is going to beat a better team.'



2003

Pistons 4, Magic 3

31.7 ppg, 6.7 rpg, 4.7 apg

After losing a 3-1 series lead: "It's tough. This was a winnable series for us. It's tough to swallow." —*Detroit News*

SN: He healed your back? Who's the doctor?

McGRADY: Dr. John Patterson. He had worked on (Rockets assistant coach) Charlie Ward, and Charlie told me I should go see him. He is the one who worked on Terrell Owens' leg. Andy Roddick saw him. I called Andy, and he said he was great.

SN: Must be nice to pick up the phone and get a doctor's recommendation from Andy Roddick. But what did the doctor do?

McGRADY: It was weird. It's some kind of biochemistry thing. I was like, "This is not going to work." He told me I would feel better the second I got up. So, I'm thinking, "OK, let's see." I get down on this table, and I am lying there for almost three hours. There are three doctors there, chiropractors and all, and they're all just touching different spots.

There was this woman who was wearing gloves, and she had a spray bottle. And she sprayed water on my back and rubbed it in, you know, poking around. I had no idea what she was doing.

2005

Mavericks 4, Rockets 3

30.7 ppg, 7.4 rpg, 6.7 apg

"I'm disgusted. I'm real mad. I'm angry. All that stuff. At the same time, I won't hang my head. I will be back next year. This is all going to make me tougher. I never will fold." —*Houston Chronicle*



SN: So now, you're healthy and you're in the playoffs. How does that change your routine?

McGRADY: Me, I am the kind of guy who has no big routine. I get into the arena, lie down on the training table and watch TV.

SN: How about scouting reports? Here you guys are with the Jazz—how much time do you spend looking at those?

McGRADY: I don't spend a minute with scouting reports. Really. I know these guys. They might put in some wrinkles here and there, but I think most players don't read the scouting reports. You don't need a scouting report to know what Utah is going to do from game to game. You know their plays. They're going to pick-and-roll, pick-and-roll and pick-and-roll.

SN: At least it's easy to remember.

McGRADY: Exactly.

FROM LEFT: EZRA O. SHAW / GETTY IMAGES; JONATHAN DANIEL / GETTY IMAGES; CHRIS O'MEARA / AP; ALLEN EINSTEIN / NBAE / GETTY IMAGES; ROBERT SEALE / SN ARCHIVES

SN

We usually ignore those on the other side of the border—but now is not the time.

0 Canada, we stand in awe of thee

By Dave D'Alessandro

I've given this a lot of thought, and I came up with the reason why Americans love Canada: It is because Canada is the gift that keeps on giving.

It is a truly glorious place, this vast white suburb of Detroit, inhabited by 32 million people of generous spirit. The best part is they really want nothing in return, which is convenient because those of us on this side of the border don't really give back much.

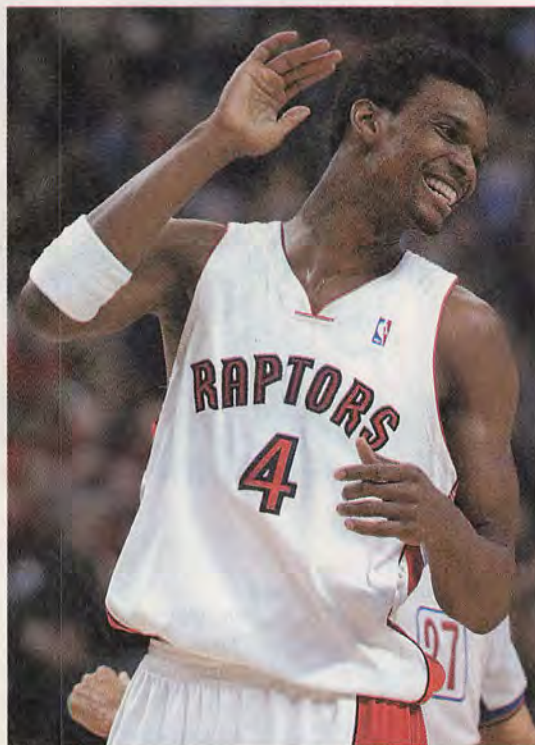
They send us these magnificent gusts of fresh air in the spring and fall; we send back acid rain and other forms of environmental pollution. They give us Joni Mitchell and Bruce Cockburn; we send them Bill O'Reilly and MTV. They send us some really good adult beverages; we reward them by taxing their timber.

And now they're doing something else for us: They're giving us a fairly good blueprint for a winning basketball franchise.

It remains to be seen whether the Raptors are built for the postseason, but that doesn't matter right now. We'll learn soon enough, when their best players hit their primes. We only know that in a matter of months, they have built something pretty special—something with a shelf life—and they are just a few bodies shy of being a finished product.

For now, consider what they have:

■ Probably the best big man in the East. That would be Chris Bosh. If you think that distinction belongs to Dwight Howard, think about this first: In their three meetings this year, Bosh cranked Howard for 34.3 points and 11.3



Bosh can hear it: the sweet sound of success.

rebounds per game. Bosh will finish in the top five in the MVP balloting. He's one of those new-age bigs whose repertoire—post game, shooting stroke, range, rim-to-rim runs in transition, slashing ability—is going to make him the standard-bearer for a long time. There are very few guys his size who have his versatility.

■ The coach of the year, if the voters just remember that this was a 27-55 team a year ago. Sam Mitchell's approach is a tad unconventional, but he has proved he can take a lot of

very unusual ingredients and make a great stew. His greatest gain this year was getting an impossibly young team to stop chasing its tail after only one month together. All the kids—Jose Calderon, Andrea Bargnani, Jorge Garbajosa, T.J. Ford and Bosh—play with remarkable unselfishness. Clearly, somebody taught them that.

■ The executive of the year, and Bryan Colangelo will win it in a walk. He turned around Phoenix in one summer and now he has done the same in Toronto. He drafted well, found a few rock-solid free agents overseas, made smart trades and stood by a coach nobody thought would get out of November. For a guy who once traded Steve Nash for Martin Muursepp, Bubba Wells and Pat Garrity, that's an amazing run of winners.

■ Two guys who will make the all-rookie team, Bargnani and Garbajosa.

That's a formidable core. Regardless of how long the Raptors last in this postseason, the league will long note what Colangelo has accomplished in a very short time and will follow his formula.

He probably shouldn't expect anything in return. **SN**

Dave D'Alessandro covers the NBA for The Star-Ledger in Newark, N.J.

speedread

All referee Joey Crawford ever wanted was to do his job and not be shown up, and it was very clear Tim Duncan—a whiner of the highest magnitude—was showing him up. David Stern would understand that if it were Rasheed Wallace doing the laughing. But because of this double standard, the league's best ref has been banished from Stern's nanny state.

 Keep up with the latest playoff news at sportingnews.com.

INSIDE DISH

Any minute now, **Rick Carlisle** is going to be a goner in Indiana, and PF **Jermaine O'Neal** may not be far behind. He stated again last week that if the team is rebuilding, he should leave. ➤ The Knicks finished 4-15 after CEO **James Dolan** announced that **Isiah Thomas** was going to continue to drive the bus for the next four years. In a radio interview last week, Dolan defended that move but admitted the Knicks screwed up on the C **Eddy Curry** deal because the '07 draft pick they included wasn't lottery-protected. ➤ Orlando

PF **Dwight Howard** became only the second player in NBA history to grab 1,000 rebounds and shoot 60 percent from the floor in the same season. **Wilt Chamberlain** was the first, and he did it three times. ➤ The Nets and SG **Vince Carter's** agent have begun talks on an extension, but they're far apart on money. Carter is looking for a deal (three years, \$60 million) along the lines of the one the Celtics gave SF **Paul Pierce**, and the Nets are thinking more like \$45 million. Carter can opt out of his contract this summer.

Kyle Busch is brash and competitive, passionate and talented. He's also 21 years old, and you know what that means.

The driver of tomorrow is still learning today

By Bob Pockrass

Like it or not, Kyle Busch is the future of Nextel Cup racing.

With apologies to Denny Hamlin, Busch is the best young driver on the circuit. He has little fear and great feel for racing. He has the passion and competitiveness needed to win races.

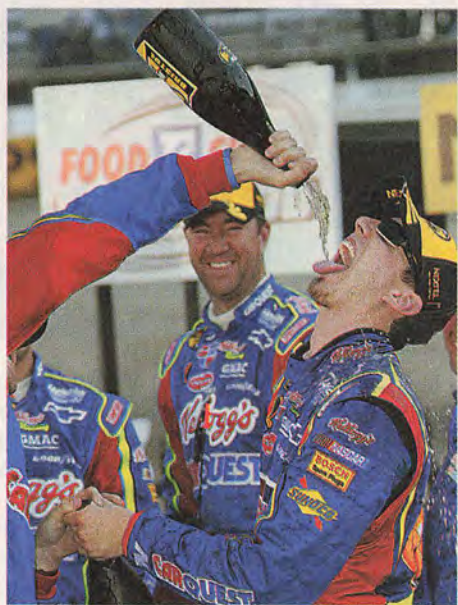
But with that passion and competitiveness comes a little attitude, a little brashness that helps him on the track and can torment him off it once in a while.

Such was the case when he left the track after crashing at Texas Motor Speedway a couple of weeks ago. Just left. Didn't get permission or even check with anyone.

He drove the car into the garage, and it was so hard to turn that Busch figured there was no way his team could get the car back into the race. His crew chief, also frustrated, didn't go talk to Busch but started ripping pieces off the car to try to get it back out on the track.

When the car was ready to go, Busch was on his way to the airport.

It wasn't the smartest thing in the world to



This is what sometimes happens when Busch sticks around for the end of the race.

do. Busch left his team in the lurch. Luckily, a guy who is the sport's most popular driver (Dale Earnhardt Jr.) got in his car.

Hendrick officials and his crew chief say there are no problems between Busch and his team. That's hard to imagine. Many other drivers say they would never leave the track without permission.

Busch says it won't happen again. It can't happen again. He already has too much of a reputation for being arrogant on the track.

When he won the first Car of Tomorrow race at Bristol, he got out of his car and ripped NASCAR's new vehicle. At least he was honest, but he could have been honest with a little more finesse.

Busch, 21, can be a joy to be around. He is funny, and when he does appearances, he is genuine and sincere. He has worked hard on his image lately, those around him say. His bosses at Hendrick say he is acting much more mature. Some of his competitors say he is racing cleaner and smarter.

He knows that if he has close to the best car, he can win the race. But part of him says that if he has close to the best car, he *should* win the race.

Battles on the track that include occasionally roughing up opponents are likely to be part of Busch's future. Once in a while he will make an aggressive move he thinks he can complete but instead he will cause an accident. Most of those sins can be forgiven.

But there are things he absolutely cannot do if he wants his image to improve. He found out earlier this month that leaving the track without talking to anyone is one of those things.

SN

Bob Pockrass is an associate editor for NASCAR Scene. Read more from Pockrass at scenedaily.com.



ROAD TEST RE-EVALUATION

Department of Motor Enforcement - Division of Defensive Driving
Form 12-A, Rev. 4-02. Re: Responsible Roadway Etiquette

DEFENSIVE DRIVING APTITUDE - PASS/FAIL

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SIGNALING | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DOWNSHIFTING | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BRAKING DISTANCE |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DRIVING DISTANCE | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SAFE ACCELERATION | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PASSING |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RIGHT OF WAY | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SEAT BELT USAGE | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> APPROPRIATE SPEED |



INSTRUCTOR COMMENTS:

- On file with Bristol authorities for causing what he described as the "hardest hit ever experienced in a car." Huffman forcefully rear-ended two other vehicles after constant tailgating - he spun sideways and blocked up the entire roadway behind him.
- Quoted by Texas officials as saying that he "loves instigating speed contests in anything with a motor and wheels."



NASCAR BUSCH SERIES at TALLADEGA

Coverage begins SATURDAY 2:30 PM ET/11:30 AM PT



INSIDE DISH

What's the best way to purge the memories of a disappointing season? You might try **Jamie McMurray's** approach and jettison all your old equipment. After a lackluster 25th-place finish in points in his debut season with Roush Fenway Racing, McMurray's team

scrapped all the chassis it used last year. With new equipment, most of it modeled after the Fords driven by teammate **Matt Kenseth**, McMurray has climbed to 12th in points. After winning in his second career start back in 2002, McMurray has been pegged as a breakout star ... for five years running. He's not there yet—and he still hasn't won again—but this is his best run in several years. ➤ **Jeff Gordon's** win last week was impressive for a reason other than it tied him with **Dale Earnhardt** for career wins. It also was



McMurray



Gordon has two more tracks to check off of his to-win list.

Gordon's first win at Phoenix—which makes Homestead-Miami and Texas the only two active tracks he has not won on. He had a strong car at Texas two weeks ago before hitting the wall late and knocking himself out of contention, and his team has shown vast improvement at tracks similar to Homestead. ➤ **Denny Hamlin** looks like a championship contender. He hasn't won but is only 242 points behind Gordon, the leader. Hamlin has been strong in all three Car of Tomorrow races, and there are five COT races in the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup.

Pit box

Fantasy experts Roger Kuznia and Vinnie Iyer pick Nextel Cup race winners.

Who will win at Talladega?

Vinnie: Jeff Gordon has been sitting pretty in the Nextel Cup standings all season, and last week's win made him look even prettier. He has had some great Talladega days in the past, and he'll make it win No. 5 at one of the series' most popular—and simplest—tracks. Just like the Tide, expect Gordon to roll in 'Bama.

Roger: Provided Juan Pablo Montoya doesn't get in his way, Tony Stewart will win. Stewart was the class of the field at Daytona in February before Kurt Busch inexplicably wrecked him. We all know orange (and blue) reigns supreme in Alabama. Go Auburn Tigers, and go Tony the Tiger!

- **Sleeper:** Brian Vickers.
- **Not so fast:** Jeff Burton.

- **Sleeper:** Kasey Kahne.
- **Not so fast:** Ryan Newman.

Nextel Cup points (based on how the experts' choices finished in points races): Roger 1,022, Vinnie 1,015.

SPEED reads

A few weeks ago I bloviated about how everyone should stop encouraging Mark Martin to run for the championship. I didn't think his team was championship-caliber. I still think the media should stop cheerleading, but it's clear I was just about 100 percent wrong on his team. He has run only six of eight races, but he is 10th in points—ahead of 25 drivers who have run all eight races.

Twenty-six if you count Dale Jarrett, who has entered all eight races but hasn't run in any of them. His pace has been closer to jogging.

This weekend NASCAR goes to Talladega. There will be danger, mayhem and craziness. And that's just in the campground.

Brian Vickers, this is your life: The last time you visited Talladega, you got your first win. Now, you probably won't make the race. —Matt Crossman

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Castrol GTX Engine Sludge Tip #25

Engine sludge is a thick, dark substance that adheres to critical engine parts inhibiting the engine's performance, decreasing the vehicle's fuel efficiency and ultimately, reducing engine life. To find out how to keep sludge from forming in your engine, check out Castrol.com/sludge.

YOU CAN'T SEE SLUDGE COMING. GTX CAN.



Fight back against sludge with the superior sludge protection of Castrol GTX. Its new anti-sludge formula hammers sludge before it can build up in your engine. GTX is so powerful, it passed the industry's toughest sludge standard.* Not all oils did. You can't see sludge coming. Better get something that can. Castrol GTX. Check out castrol.com/us for more information.

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*GTX 5W-30 and 10W-30

Despite all the interviews, skills analysis and 40 times, it really comes down to who makes the best guess.

It's debate that makes the draft so great

By Paul Attner

pattner@sportingnews.com

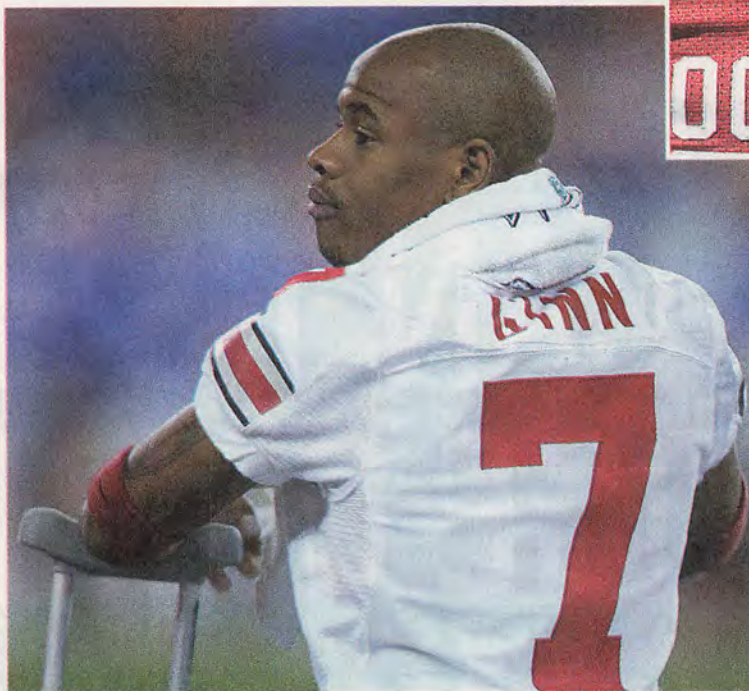
Be honest. One of the lures that attracts you to the NFL draft is second-guessing. You love to look at old drafts and wonder how a team, or an entire league, could be so stupid as to take Ryan Leaf with the second pick of the 1998 draft or wait until the third round of the 1979 draft to select Joe Montana or almost let Dan Marino slip from the first round of the 1983 draft.

We aren't sure yet, of course, what mistakes will be made in this draft. But we probably won't have to wait long. Remember last year, when the Texans passed on Reggie Bush and chose Mario Williams? Jon Gruden does. "I thought, 'You've got to be kidding me. They did what? Good God.'"

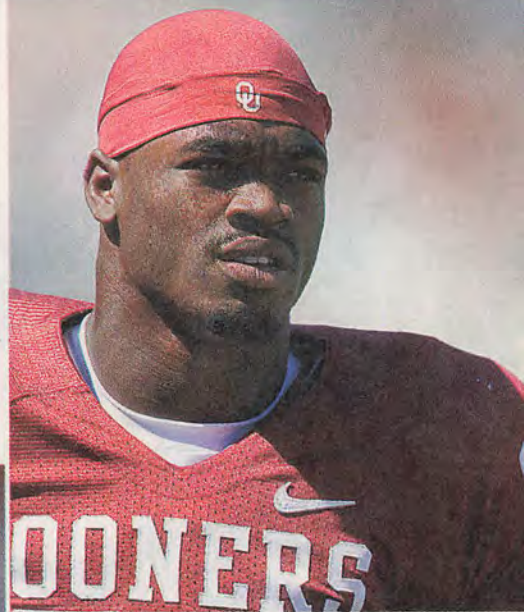
What makes the draft so wonderful is the human element involved. The personnel guys making decisions don't think alike or judge talent alike. Some clearly are better than others in practicing their craft. So disagreements over players are inevitable, and mistakes in judgment are just as predictable.

Consider this draft. Oklahoma's Adrian Peterson and Ohio State's Ted Ginn are two intriguing names among the elite players. One is a running back, the other a receiver. Different positions, different body builds, different college resumes. But both are incredibly gifted, linked by speed that is rare even for the NFL. You would think it would be an easy decision to gobble them up as soon as possible.

Not so. I asked two scouts to analyze Peterson and Ginn. Going in, I had no idea how they felt about each player. But what transpired is an incredibly revealing insight into the world of the draft. It shows how two experts can differ so dramatically about the value of even the best



JAY DROWNS / SN



Ginn is the better NFL prospect. No, Peterson is. Opinions are like 40 times—everyone has one.

than Calvin Johnson. You can't ignore he had injuries and got suspended at OU for not going to class. Those are asterisks. But the only running back I have seen with this kind of talent in the past eight years is LaDainian Tomlinson. Peterson is a home run hitter—he's aggressive, attacks the line, can change direction in a hole and just has incredible speed."

Scout No. 2 on Peterson: "He is the kind of guy who can score any time he touches the ball. But his style is susceptible to getting a lot of hits. He runs straight up, and it makes him vulnerable. That's maybe why he gets hurt. I like the way (Marshawn) Lynch runs better; he is closer to the ground, more elusive, breaks tackles.

players, how a prospect's slotting depends so much on simply having one team fall in love with his potential—and how players wind up being selected at incorrect points in the draft.

Scout No. 1 on Peterson: "He is the most fascinating pick in the first round. He is a big-time star. You can make an argument he is even better



JEFF ROBERSON / AP

speedreads

It's ridiculous to fine **Brian Urlacher** \$100,000 for not wearing an NFL-approved hat at Super Bowl media day. I'm not convinced many folks are so influenced by all this logo-wearing that they immediately dash out to their local store. But obviously the NFL is determined to protect its corporate sponsors.

It's nice Michael Vick wants to collect \$10,000 to help victims of the tragedy at Virginia Tech. But it would be even better if he would write a check for that amount from his own resources. That would be a big step toward demonstrating he has the maturity required to become a consistent star.

Another sad sign from the Raiders: Lane Kiffin, who has no NFL experience calling plays, has assigned himself those duties even though Greg Knapp, a veteran at calling plays, is on the staff.

I would take Lynch over Peterson."

Scout No. 1 on Ginn: "There is something about him that bothers me. I can't put my finger on it. There just haven't been many guys like him before this. He weighed 178 at the Combine, and the only receiver at this level who has been that light recently was Randy Moss, and he weighed 185. That bothers you. Ginn is a big-time return guy, and if you are on defense, he will scare you every time he touches the ball. But I'm not sure he can hold up physically. He might get broken in half. And why wasn't his college production better?"

Scout No. 2 on Ginn: "If you need play-makers, and most of us do, how can you not take this guy? He can have an immediate impact because of his return skills. And we see the way speed at receiver changes how you defend. You have to account for him on every down or he will run right past you. The quarterback at Ohio State couldn't play; he wasn't good enough to take advantage of what Ginn can do. But Ginn will be in a pro offense in the NFL that will play to his strengths."

Scout No. 1 would take Peterson in the top five; scout No. 2 would pick Lynch over Peterson, and he would select neither in the top five. Scout No. 1 would choose Ginn no earlier than 15th; scout No. 2 would take Ginn in the top 10. Same players, significantly different evaluations.

Who's right? Check back in a year.

SN

BLOG ALERT

'Will Shields will be lauded as not just one of the all-time great guards but also one of the all-time great men the NFL has ever known.'

Shields may have left K.C. in the lurch, but Mike Naehrstedt doesn't think that matters in the grand scheme. Tell us what you think at sportingnews.com.



JOHN CORDES FOR SN

Kiel's career was derailed, but he could provide a service for the league.

News that three top prospects—DE **Gaines Adams**, WR **Calvin Johnson** and DT **Amobi Okoye**—told teams at the NFL Scouting Combine that they have tried marijuana at least once in their young lives will have no effect on their draft status. Some personnel guys believe up to 90 percent of draft-eligible players have smoked marijuana; others concede at least 50 percent have done so. Teams accept such experimentation. They become concerned only when there are indications of repeated drug use. ➤ It is almost inconceivable RB **Ricky Williams** will be on the Dolphins' opening day roster. Don't forget that G.M. **Randy Mueller**, now making the Dolphins' personnel decisions, is the guy who traded Williams from the Saints in 2002 when he was general manager in New Orleans. No one in the league is more familiar with Williams or has more reserva-

INSIDE DISH

league now includes five teams in Germany and one in the Netherlands. Many NFL clubs question its long-term benefits, and it will be interesting to see whether new commissioner **Roger Goodell** remains a supporter or allows the league to die. ➤ Vikings owner **Zygi Wilf** is hoping Goodell remains a supporter in another area. The NFL's fund to help finance new stadiums has expired, but Wilf wants a new stadium in Minnesota. Plans for the \$954 million facility were revealed last week, although the team concedes there is no financing in place. Wilf desperately needs a boost from the league, which will come only if owners vote to reestablish the loan program. But first, Goodell has to push for it. ➤ One of the

most intriguing players in the draft is Louisville RB **Michael Bush**. He figured to be a first-round prospect until he broke his leg last September. He has just now begun the tryout process. His surgeon, the respected **James Andrews**, has proclaimed Bush "99 percent" healed, but Bush still carries considerable risk. It's likely to be a team with few needs that picks him.



JAY DROWNS / SN

About 80 percent of QB **Brett Favre's** bad decisions last season came with the Packers down by at least two touchdowns in the fourth quarter. Coach **Mike McCarthy** will continue to work with Favre to be more careful in those situations and not to view them as so desperate. But it will help the Packers, and Favre, even more if McCarthy's desire to develop a Broncos-like running scheme works out.

NFL INSIDE THE AFC

The **CHIEFS** will plug in **John Welbourn** at right guard to replace the retired **Will Shields**. Welbourn can play tackle, but he probably is a better fit at guard, where his lack of athleticism isn't as much of a liability. He is physical at the point of attack. ... The **BENGALS** bolstered their depth by signing DT **Michael Myers**. The team will count on him to keep the interior bottled up in the running game, but he lacks special qualities as a

pass rusher. ... The **TEXANS** matched the Giants' offer sheet to FB **Vonta Leach**. A former linebacker, Leach uses that defensive mentality when opening holes as a lead blocker. The coaches have been critical of his practice habits, but Leach contends he has to dial it back so he doesn't hurt himself or his teammates. Regardless, the coaches don't complain about what he brings on Sundays. ... After allowing FS **Ed Reed** to freelance a lot last season, the **RAVENS** will rein him in a bit. He allowed several big plays because he was caught out of position. ... OLB **Darnell Bing** (neck) missed his rookie season but is ready to make his mark with the **RAIDERS**. He has impressive speed and is a big hitter. A safety in college, Bing still needs to add some weight and pick up the nuances of his new position. ... In the aftermath of **Pacman Jones'** seasonlong suspension, the **TITANS** are in better shape at cornerback than at punt returner. One player who figures to get a long look in the return game is second-year CB **Cortland Finnegan**. He has good hands and quick feet and was a standout returner at Samford. ... The **COLTS** re-signed LB **Rocky Boiman**, who could compete for a starting spot in the middle or on the strong side. Boiman (6-4, 236), who primarily played in goal-line situations in 2006, would add some size to the unit. ... **STEELERS** TE **Heath Miller** likely will have an expanded

Boiman is back with Indy, and it may be in a bigger role.



Myers has a specific job to do with the Bengals: stop the run.

MARC PISCOTTY FOR SN

role. He runs sharp routes, has good hands and is tough to bring down after the catch. ... After releasing **Al Wilson**, the **BRONCOS** might try SLB **D.J. Williams** in the middle. Williams (6-1, 242) has the bulk and speed to handle the role, but he would have to show he can align his teammates and make calls. That option gives the team the flexibility to look at inside or outside linebackers in the draft. ... **JETS** CB **Justin Miller** needs to show major improvement to win a starting job. He suffers from lapses in concentration, his ball skills need work, and his tackling is erratic. If he weren't a dynamic kick returner, Miller might be a goner. ... QB **Derek Anderson**

had a horrible finish to last season but still intrigues enough of the right people in the **BROWNS'** hierarchy. Opponents exploited Anderson's lack of mobility, so he is trying to improve his ability to handle the blitz. He reads the field better and has a



JOHN DUNN FOR SN

Miller is electric as a return man, but the light has yet to go on for him as a corner.

stronger, more accurate arm than incumbent **Charlie Frye**. ... With the **DOLPHINS'** quarterback situation in flux, **Cleo Lemon** took every snap with the first team at last week's minicamp. He likely won't get a chance to start, but Lemon is making better decisions and showing a strong presence in the pocket.

FOCUS ON OFFSEASON STARS

Jaguars FB **Greg Jones** appears months ahead of schedule as he works his way back from last year's season-ending knee injury. New coordinator **Dirk Koetter** will try to find ways to take advantage of Jones' bruising, north-south running style and his soft hands in the passing game. Even though they have an excellent combo in **Fred Taylor** and **Maurice Jones-Drew**, the Jaguars will be able to find room for Jones in the game plans. ... As a rookie, CB **Ashton Youboty** was inactive for 11 of the Bills' first 12 games, but he is using the offseason to try to carve out a more significant role. He has gotten stronger and picked up a firmer grasp of the schemes. Youboty, who is athletic and has good ball skills, could win a starting job. ...

Chargers DE **Luis Castillo**, who is healthy after his 2006 season was marred by a severe ankle sprain, is attacking his offseason workouts as if he's trying to win a roster spot. The big, fast Castillo wants to become such a disruptive force that he requires double-teams. ... Patriots TE **David Thomas** arrived two weeks before the start of the offseason program and is determined to seize the opportunity for playing time resulting from the departure of **Daniel Graham**. Thomas has excellent hands, knows how to shield defenders with his body and can find soft spots in zone coverage.



DAVID DUROCHIK FOR SN

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Michael C. Wright; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jeff Darlington; New England, John Tomase; New York, Rich Cimini; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.

INSIDE THE NFC



JOHN CORDES FOR SN

Baas could throw his weight around to earn a starting job on the 49ers' line.

The **EAGLES'** Sean Considine has added about 15 pounds of muscle so he'll be better in run support if he plays closer to the line next season. A natural free safety, Considine was asked to play strong safety last year and struggled at the point of attack, particularly against power running teams. ... **David Patten**, signed by the **SAINTS**, could be a reliable slot receiver if he can stay healthy after two injury-filled seasons. Patten will turn 33 this season but still has decent speed and runs good routes. ... The **49ERS** would like to get bigger on the offensive line, and **David**

Baas (6-4, 320) could push **Justin Smiley** (6-3, 301) at right guard. Since losing the job to Smiley last year, Baas has improved his work ethic and worked on his pass-blocking technique. ... The **LIONS'** **Cory Redding** will stay at under tackle, where he flourished after moving from end last season. Opponents struggled to handle his quickness and explosiveness inside. The team's franchise player, Redding is unsigned. He is taking classes at Texas and isn't participating in the offseason program. ...

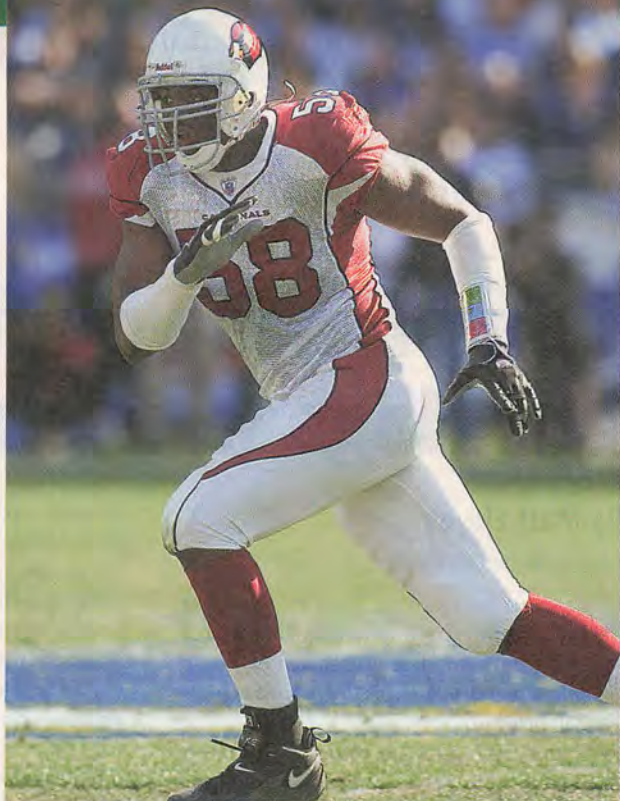
The **COWBOYS** used zone-blocking schemes on many running plays last season to take advantage of RB **Julius Jones'** vision and quick feet. That could change this season; the line has gotten bigger, which means the team will use more of a power blocking scheme. That style doesn't suit Jones, who's more of a finesse runner. ... For now, **Vernand Morency** is the top candidate to be the **PACKERS'** starting running back. He helped himself by showing up for the offseason program in top condition. Morency excels at making defenders miss in the open field but needs to make better reads to hit his cutback lanes. ... The **PANTHERS** would like **Nate Salley** to claim the third or fourth safety spot and be a key player on special teams coverage units. Salley is a hard hitter but needs to prove himself in coverage and show he can stay with receivers deep. ... **BEARS** FB **Jason McKie** did



JAY DROWNS / SN

Morency is preparing to be the Pack's No. 1 back.

a better job of handling defenders at the point of attack last season. McKie can be effective opening holes for RB **Cedric Benson** and providing a checkdown receiving option for QB **Rex Grossman**. ... Free-agent pickup **Joey Harrington**, who will be the **FALCONS'** No. 2 quarterback, has the experience to manage a game if **Michael Vick** gets hurt. Harrington struggled with the Lions and Dolphins but could benefit from working with coach **Bobby Petrino**, who has experience developing quarterbacks. ...



TODD WARSHAW FOR TSN

FOCUS ON OFFSEASON STARS

Cardinals OLB **Karlos Dansby** landed in the doghouse last year after a poor showing in the preseason, but he has been a regular at offseason workouts and has embraced the new conditioning and lifting program. The club is moving toward running a 3-4 scheme in which Dansby would move to inside linebacker. He has the size (6-4, 240) and speed to excel at that spot. ... Not only has QB **Jason Campbell** been at the Redskins' facility every day since the offseason program began, he was there weeks before anyone was asked to show up. Campbell is working with coaches on his footwork, technique and grasp of the offense. He has impressed the staff with his ability to absorb material. ... Buccaneers CB **Phillip Buchanon** has been working daily on fundamentals with new secondary coach **Raheem Morris**; in particular, Morris is helping Buchanon limit his tendency to guess too much. Buchanon could have a chance to push starting CB **Brian Kelly** for playing time. ... Seahawks OLB **Leroy Hill** is known for using his speed and explosiveness to make plays, but this offseason, he's learning to play more under control and is getting stronger. Such improvements will play into the team's plans to use Hill more as a blitzer.

Free-agent acquisition **Anthony Wright** gives the **GIANTS** the veteran backup quarterback they needed. Wright has decent mobility and arm strength, but his primary role will be to help mentor QB **Eli Manning**. ... RB **Ciatrick Fason**, a dark-horse candidate to be the **VIKINGS'** change-of-pace back, has impressed coaches in off-season workouts. Fason knows how to avoid contact at the line and can make people miss in the open field. Coaches want him to run with a lower pad level. ... **Donnie Jones**, signed by the **RAMS** to fix a long-standing problem spot, is a left-footed punter with a powerful leg. Jones, 26, led the NFL in net punting average in 2005 at 39.3 yards, though his net fell to 35.7 last season.

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, D. Orlando Ledbetter; Carolina, Pat Yasinskas; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Kevin Seifert; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Ralph Vacchiano; Philadelphia, Mark Eckel; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Dennis Georgatos; Seattle, Clare Farnsworth; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.

Houston, you've got a problem—but it won't be any trouble for you to get a new job.

Sometimes you feel like a Nutt, but Hogs fans sure don't

By Matt Hayes

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It's time for Houston Nutt to go. Right now—before the long, hot days of summer and before the steaming stench of a soap opera further damages the Arkansas football program.

As much as it pains me to say this, as much as I loathe the whiny players and meddling little league moms and reactionary responses, Nutt must take a buyout and walk away for the good of the program.

Too much damage has been done already.

Before we go further, let me state that Nutt annually makes my “does more with less” list. He's a fantastic motivator and has that special unwavering game-day acumen many coaches never grasp. He won't be out of work long.

But there's nothing left for him in Fayetteville. He has lost the confidence of a rabid, loyal fan base. The faith of the spineless administration—which has yet to defend him with any gusto—is next to go. One fan recently used the Arkansas Freedom of Information Act to gain access to Nutt's cell phone records and documented calls and text messages with a

 Check out where your team's big boss stacks up in Tom Dienhart's head coach rankings at sportingnews.com.

48-page magic bullet thesis, which was sent to the Arkansas board of trustees.

Last week, Nutt penned an open letter to Razorbacks fans in which he defended himself from what he called “unfounded gossip.” This is a coach who won 10 games last season, who has led the Hogs to bowl games in seven of nine seasons, who is second on the school's all-time wins list.

This is also a coach grasping for something that isn't there anymore. And he has no one to blame but himself.

This time last year, Nutt sealed his fate by selling his coaching soul. He was on the hot seat and needed three key in-state recruits—one of whom just happened to be the best prep quarterback in the country—to soothe the masses. So he hired a high school coach to run his offense (red flag); the same guy just happened to coach the three star players (red flag)—including that star quarterback, who once said that Arkansas would have a better chance of signing him if Nutt weren't the coach (red flag).

This marriage of convenience was doomed from the beginning. And here's the best part of this sad story: Nutt didn't even need the three star recruits. Quarterback Mitch Mustain played the most of the three but basically was asked to hand off and stay out of the way as an exceptional running game and underrated



MATTHEW KUTZ / SN ARCHIVES

After signing a star quarterback, Nutt got off the hot seat—but he still got burned.

defense took over.

Nutt could have played anyone at quarterback (he used serviceable Casey Dick in the last six games) and still won 10 games and saved his job.

Nearly 30 years ago, Houston Nutt the quarterback left Arkansas after two seasons for Oklahoma State because Lou Holtz had ridden into Fayetteville and installed an option offense. The pro-style passer saw his future and walked away.

It's time to walk again.

SN

This is what Iowa State coach **Gene Chizik** learned from his time at Texas and Auburn: A powerful running game feeds the offense. But the Cyclones will have to wait until fall to see whether junior college RB **Jamicah Bass** is the answer for a unit that was 99th in the nation in rushing offense last season. RBs **Jason Scales** and **Jason Harris** failed to distinguish themselves in spring drills, and the Cyclones are desperate for a running game to take pressure off QB **Bret Meyer**, who regressed last season. ➤ Attention, SEC snobs. Make fun of the Big Ten all you want, but consider that Ohio State's nonconference schedule the next four seasons includes: at Washington



(2007), at USC (2008), USC (2009), Miami (2010). ➤ California coach **Jeff Tedford** wants QB **Nate Longshore** to lose about 15



pounds—to get down to 220—by fall camp to improve his mobility. The idea is to make Longshore more of a running threat and to give him the ability to move and slide in the pocket to buy time and let plays develop. ➤ **Jim Harbaugh's** first few nonrecruiting weeks at Stanford were broken down in two areas: player evaluation to determine position changes (there have been plenty) and finding a way to protect QB **T.C. Ostrander**. In five starts last year, Ostrander was sacked 18 times—a key reason for his tendency to make hurried, poor throws and his fumbling problems.

ROBERT SEALE / SN ARCHIVES

The coaching world ain't what it used to be.

Blame it on Gonzaga

By Mike DeCourcy

decourcy@sportingnews.com

This sport convulsed through more than 60 coaching changes after the 2005-06 season, so there was every reason for us to believe this spring would be calmer. The system surely was exhausted from so much turnover.

What we could not have anticipated, though, was the impact of the Gonzaga Syndrome. It had been building through this decade, as the Zags elevated themselves from a top mid-major team to a college hoops power, and it got out of control as this season closed. That's when many colleges looked at Gonzaga's program and asked: Why not us? The fallout included the purging of coaches at Santa Clara, San Diego, Indiana State, Evansville and Illinois State among a staggering 52 changes.

Some of those programs were successful, just not successful enough. Some were building toward success but weren't there yet. It's not much of a stretch to suggest the dismissal last week of Saint Louis coach Brad Soderberg falls into this category, though news of Gonzaga's rise apparently traveled to the SLU campus by carrier pigeon.

It wasn't just Gonzaga, of course. It was Creighton's seven NCAA Tournament appearances since 1999. It was Wichita State and Bradley in the Sweet 16 and George Mason's invasion of the Final Four in 2006. Every inordinately successful mid-major team made others wonder what was wrong with their coaches.

Gonzaga's success was the result of unique circumstances. The Pacific Northwest has a fraction of the Division I schools located in other regions but no shortage of talent. In

INSIDE DISH

Virginia hopes to build on its 2006-07 success with a strong 2008 recruiting class. Its first priority is 6-9 PF **Ed Davis**, who is ranked No. 8 in the class by Rivals.com. ➤ Class of 2008 PF prospect **Delvon Roe** will be a great college player, but with his need to play along the baseline, he wouldn't have complemented the traditional low-post

bigs North Carolina has recruited. UNC offered a scholarship to PF **Al-Farouq Aminu** when it became clear Roe would join Michigan State; although Aminu needs to gain strength, he has a face-up game that'll fit in the Heels' game. ➤ Washington C **Spencer Hawes** entered the NBA draft because of concern that his ratings would drop as he aged. Hawes is extraordinarily skilled but is neither quick nor a good jumper.



JOE NICHOLSON / AP



ERIC RISBERG / AP

Keating isn't afraid of Santa Clara's high expectations, but maybe he should be.

recruiting outside of that region, Gonzaga aggressively traded on the brand name engendered by tournament success. Until assistant Billy Grier became San Diego's head coach last month, the core of Gonzaga's excellent staff had been kept intact.

Nonetheless, coaches across the country feel the pressure rising. Before, they wanted to reach the NCAAs because a tourney bid represented competitive success and, as a fringe benefit, accelerated career advancement. Now, an accomplished coach such as Missouri State's Barry Hinson finds himself under attack for falling short of the tournament during consecutive seasons in which his teams won 44 games and went 24-12 in the Missouri Valley Conference.



BLOG ALERT

'A coach who remains in his job out of loyalty without making sure he has a long-term contract is one day closer to being fired.'

Show Mike DeCourcy your loyalty by responding to his blog throughout the offseason at sportingnews.com.

This hasn't stopped other coaches from pursuing vacancies created by universities' impatience. Kerry Keating, who excelled at recruiting as a UCLA assistant, could have waited for a job at a school with a track record of tournament appearances that led its coaches to high-major jobs. He instead accepted an offer from Santa Clara, which nudged out esteemed veteran Dick Davey because he could not keep pace with the Zags in the West Coast Conference.

Keating is excited about the opportunity: beautiful campus, successful athletic department, great tradition. With Steve Nash among its alumni, Santa Clara has made 11 NCAA appearances—but none in the Gonzaga era.

"I think they wanted someone like me to bring in new life, new energy," Keating says. He points out that other programs in the league have reached the NCAAs despite the Gonzaga monolith, including St. Mary's (at-large, 2005) and San Diego (automatic qualifier, 2003).

He chose to challenge the Zags directly, but then, accepting any mid-major job would have placed Keating within the fallout of the Gonzaga Syndrome. It seems no place truly is safe.

SN

We're all Hokies

There was joy in Mudville last week—along with sorrow, prayer and the unique, poetic comfort that a simple ballgame can provide. There are far more important things than sports; that we know all too well. But the enduring beauty of these games: They are there, day after day, in case we need them.



HAROLD HINSON FOR SN

Denny Hamlin



KEVIN WOLF / AP

Charlie Manuel



JAMES LANG-USA PRESSWIRE

On campus at George Mason University



EVAN VUCCI / AP

The real Hokies, back on the field

THOMAS WRIGHT / UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA / IFAS / AP



On campus in Gainesville, Fla.

JASON BABYAK / AP

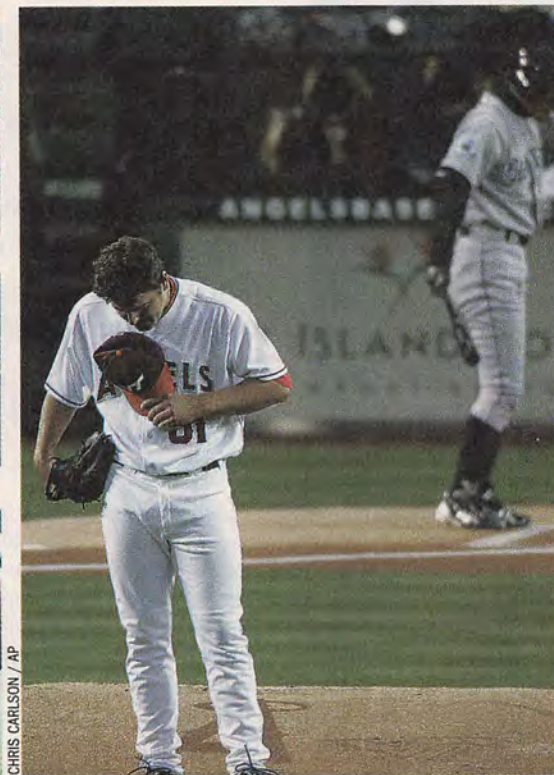


Ward Burton at Phoenix

ANDREW COHOON / AP



Charley Hoffman on the PGA Tour



CHRIS CARLSON / AP

Virginia Tech alum Joe Saunders

JAY LAPRETE / AP



Spring football at Ohio State

MARK CRAMMER / AP



The Virginia Cavaliers—Hokies for a day

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